

“Reformation: Law and Gospel”
Matthew 5:17-20, 43-48
Andrew Foster Connors
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I was going to preach on the Priesthood of All Believers this week until I heard a conservative commentator on Wednesday morning defending his pro gun politics using Reformed theology. “On the one side we call this mass murder,” he said; the other side calls it “gun violence.” “One [side] focuses on the person,” he continued. The other “focuses on the means, on the item, the inanimate object that’s used to perpetrate that evil. On the right we say this isn’t necessarily a political issue - this is a human nature issue. . . on the right we say, [gun ownership] is a way that the weak can protect themselves against the strong and therefore [the right to bear arms is] something that we need to protect and recognize that bad people can do bad things.”¹

At the risk of moving too carelessly across our nation’s most recent wound, I think it’s important that we take this conservative commentator’s critique seriously. That liberals fail to adequately take account of sin and the evil that some human beings carry out. That in moving quickly to deal with guns – those “inanimate objects,” as the commentator calls them - we avoid addressing the real issue in our country – human sin. The evil that we do to each other. And that politics, for the left, has become a convenient way to avoid dealing with issues that can’t be dealt with through politics at all.

In many ways the Protestant Reformation grew out of taking sin seriously. Martin Luther was acutely aware of his own sin. He followed the church’s teachings severely, yet could not find relief. At the same time, Luther saw the Church monetizing a monopoly on dispensing grace. For the right price, the wealthy could buy indulgences to make them “cleaner than Adam before the Fall.” “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,” said one seller, “the soul from purgatory springs.”²

Luther’s great insight was that human beings are not made right with God because of our faith, as if we earn God’s saving with our belief or our practice. God doesn’t demand faith from us as if we could earn God’s favor. Rather, faith and justice (or righteousness) are both the work of God. Both are free gifts.

Those gifts become manifest – made real - through law and gospel. The law sets forth the contrast between God’s ways and our own – it makes God’s judgment

¹ Chris Buskirk, editor of *American Greatness*, interviewed on “Morning Edition,” *National Public Radio*, October 4, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning-edition/2017/10/04/555520195?showDate=2017-10-04> - “Why the Gun Debate Goes On and Nothing Changes.”

² These slogans came from Dominican John Tetzel, the man put in charge of selling indulgences, proof of early advertising. Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, (New York: HarperCollins), 1985, p. 21.

clear. And Gospel – that assurance of God’s fierce love for us - makes this gospel shockingly good news.

John Calvin summarized Luther like this: The first use of the law is to convict us of our sin. Looking at God’s justice is like hold up a mirror, Calvin said, that shows us how many spots we have on our face.³ In that way, the law leads us to seek out God’s grace. The law itself is an instrument of God’s grace, the mirror that turns us back to God. I think this first use of the law is what the conservative commentator has in mind when he wants to talk about human nature instead of guns. The real issue, he says, is the need for sinful people to turn from their sin, to turn toward God. No civil law can address that issue. In a sense I agree with him. Matters of the heart, mind, and spirit can’t be enacted through civil society. Politics can’t change everything.

But Luther and Calvin agreed there was at least one other use of the law – to restrain evil. And here’s where the commentator’s theology begins to fall flat. We don’t pursue gun regulation as a substitute for dealing with human nature. On the contrary, because human beings do participate in evil, because human beings are sometimes violent, and sometimes racist, and sometimes hateful; because sin sometimes defaces or obscures the image of God present within each of us, we need laws that restrain evil. We need reasonable speed limits to keep people from endangering other people. We need reasonable speech limits that keep people from shouting “fire” indiscriminately inside the movie theater. And we need reasonable gun laws that keep guns out of the hands of people who are likely to use them to kill innocent people. Reasonable gun laws to keep unreasonably lethal weapons off our streets.

It’s heartening to see that Republican and Democrats seem to be able to find some agreement on this point. Republicans and Democrats agree that no one in this country should be allowed to own fully automatic weapons, a law that’s been on the books since the 1930s. It’s heartening because it means that there is not disagreement over whether guns can and should be regulated. The disagreement is over where those laws need to fall. Whether your right to own a semi-automatic weapon overrules my right to go to a concert, or to school, or a nightclub knowing I won’t have to face a one-man military force. And while I don’t pretend to know exactly where that line should fall I would think that if the commentator really believed that human nature is the real issue that needed to be dealt with, he would want more gun regulation, not less. More ways to restrict the proliferation of guns instead of spreading them around.

What the gun lobby or its spokespeople seems never willing to confess is the sin that permeates the gun economy itself. Sin that’s not that different from the sin that the Catholic Church refused to confess in 1517 – that behind all of the principled talk about protecting the weak, and freedom and liberty, lies a gun industry who’s primary interest is to sell more guns. Let’s deal with human sin in all of its forms. Not just the lone shooter who’s motives we might never understand, but an industry who’s motive we do understand.

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, Chapter 7, 6-7.

To Luther's two uses of the law, Calvin added a third. The law could not save us, he said. Only Christ could do that. But that doesn't mean the law is irrelevant. On the contrary, the purpose of the law for anyone who's aware of God's incredible generosity, is to show us how to live. Inspired by Calvin, Reformed Churches used to read the Ten Commandments together in every worship service after the assurance of pardon. The law wasn't just there to convict us of our sin. It wasn't just there to restrain those intent on doing evil. It was there to show us how to live.⁴

And that's what's missing for me in the secular gun debate. America often thinks about law only in terms of what it restrains. But the Christian thinks about God's law in terms of what it teaches. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches that the law demands more of us in our relationships with each other. That those who understand God's unreasonable way of generosity must learn how to live it. Not just refraining from murder, but going much farther, rooting out anger that divides us. Not just refraining from adultery, but going much farther, rejecting the kind of objectification that is the seedbed for deception. Not just loving your neighbors, but going much farther, loving your enemies, too. The law becomes the teacher.

Think about that for a minute. The one who we say has saved us doesn't throw out the law as some unnecessary item from the religious past.⁵ When we know God's saving love, we have to think not just what we're allowed to do, but how do we show love for our neighbors in all that we do. We have to think not just for our own safety but for the safety of others, too.

Actually, the words "have to" don't really fit. "Have to" sounds like something you have to do while holding your nose, or twisting your arm. The way of Jesus is the way of abundant life. We're invited to live a life that is so much fuller and freer and joyful than the one promised by the worship of the gun. There is a different way that leads to life. A different way that leads to peace.

One time, in college, I was handing out flyers to a health clinic in a little community far from my hometown. Like anyone who has encountered someone handing out anything at a grocery store, most people I encountered averted their eyes from me, suspicious, until they heard the words "free health clinic" and saw the details of the flyer. Only then did their guard come down. Instead of potential threat, they realized I might be potential help. But one man who I later suspected may have been on drugs, quickly drew a large knife out of his belt. The rusty blade must have been at least 8 inches long. Before I knew what was happening, the blade was right in front of my face and he asked me how I'd like it if he did something with the blade that I cannot repeat. With no time to think I said, idiotically, "I wouldn't like that at all. But hey, brother," I heard myself say, "It's just a free health clinic.

⁴ For a great summary of these three uses of the law, see William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, pp. 73-84.

⁵ "Antinomianism" in Christian theology, is the idea that Christian freedom is given over and against Mosaic law. The early Reformers and much of the Christian church rejected this idea as heresy though it has been popularized by the simplistic idea that Jesus freed Christians from law. In addition to departing from mainstream Christian belief, it is often accompanied by an anti-Jewish sentiment that sees Mosaic law only as rigid legalism.

You know free blood pressure checks. Maybe it would be good to have yours checked.” He stared me down for some very long seconds, then burst into laughter, put the blade back where it came from, shook my hand, and apologized.

It occurred to me this week that, under the law of the state I was in, I probably had a *right* to shoot that man. But is that really what God would have wanted to me to do? Is that the way God really wants me to live? As though every human being I meet is a potential threat? As though violence can only be stemmed with more violence? As though arming yourself could solve your problems and save you from this world? Isn't that the way this shooter in Vegas seems to have ended up? Rich in things, but poor in social connections. A life wasted on video poker and homes and more guns than friendships that left a human being defaced by sin, finally unable to see life around him as miracle, blessed, holy? What more do we need to learn about this man to see how pitiful was his life?

Which is why I agree with the conservative commentator that we have to take sin seriously in our dangerous world. The church especially, has to do more than pursue politics. We have to reweave a frayed fabric of our society, one church potluck, one small group at a time. We have to treat the disease of loneliness with our antidote of community, looking out for each other when we're running on fumes, looking out for each other when we're overcome by grief. But we don't have to stop there either. Because we know where human nature can take us, we don't withdraw from seeking political solutions to problems of violence and hate, we fight even harder for them.

Perhaps you are tired of that fight. Monday morning I went canoeing on the Susquehanna River. To do so I had to put down my cell phone lighting up with terrible news out of Las Vegas. There was nothing I could do from here. I knew that terrible news would be there for me when I got back. I said a little prayer for all those responding and set out. A friend who took me on the river pointed out to me amazing cylindrical formations carved out in many of the rocks. These cylinders, he explained, weren't carved out overnight. They were carved out by tiny pebbles swirled around and around in the rock over millions of years. As I absorbed the news that afternoon and into the week and saw us headed for a familiar pattern – terrible atrocity, followed empty prayers that lead nowhere, followed by inaction, I couldn't stop thinking about those little pebbles. So tiny, so insignificant by themselves. And yet, the river took those pebbles and used them to carve out rocks. I thought about the hundreds of years and tiny protests that it took before Martin Luther's 95 theses made their impact. I thought about those who have lost loved ones at Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, the Pulse nightclub, who's voices get a little louder and a little more organized each time. It's amazing what a pebble can do when it gives itself over the river consistently, persistently, over time.