

## Doing the Truth

*Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)*

January 16, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

I invite you to listen to a third reading this morning (meaning the sermon clock does not start until after the reading). It is a borrowed litany that could only be spoken after our children left the sanctuary because it is the future we are bequeathing them if we do nothing. I imagine it is a future that presently terrifies them more than we know. The litany begins two years after the birth of Jared Loughner and, I might add, is only partial:

October 17, 1991 a 35 year old man barreled his pick-up truck through the window of a Luby's fast food restaurant in Killeen, Texas. He opened fire on a crowd of people who were eating lunch there and when it was over he had shot and killed 23 people and wounded 20 others.

A year and a half later, a 55 year-old business man in San Francisco walked into an office building around 3:00 in the afternoon, took the elevator up to the 34th floor and shot and killed 8 people working at a law office before turning the gun on himself.

Four and a half years after that, two young boys armed with guns, an 11 year old and a 13 year old, shot and killed four girls and a teacher and wounded ten others at their middle school in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

The spring after that, in Littleton, CO, two students at Columbine High School, shot and killed 12 of their classmates, one of their teachers and wounded 26 others before killing themselves in the school's library.

Three months later a 44 year old Georgian day-trader went to the offices of two separate day trading firms in Atlanta. Armed with two guns he opened fire inside. Nine people were shot and killed before the gunman later shot himself.

A few years later in March 2005 a 44 year old man walked into a church service in Brookfield, Wisconsin brandishing a 9mm hand gun. The man shot and killed the minister and six other people before killing himself.

Just 9 days after that a sixteen year old boy in nearby Red Lake, Minnesota shot and killed his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend. Then he walked to the local high school where he shot and killed five students and a teacher and a security guard. Nine people in all.

Ten months after that a former US postal worker in California walks into the mail processing plant where she used to work. Armed only with a pistol she shot and killed seven employees and then turned the gun on herself.

Nine months after that a 32 year old man shot and killed five school age girls at an Amish school in rural Pennsylvania. Then he killed himself.

Four months later an 18 year old in Salt Lake City, Utah, walks into a local mall, opens fire, killing five and wounding four others before he was shot and killed by police.

Nine weeks after that it was a normal start to a weekday at Virginia Tech when a 23

year old, mentally disturbed Virginia Tech student roamed the campus killing 32 people and then himself. The single deadliest mass shooting in US history.

Eight months after that a 19 year old walks into a shopping mall in Omaha, Nebraska. He shoots and kills eight people and wounds four others in a span of six minutes before killing himself.

Two months after that, another US college campus, Northern Illinois University, a former student walks into a lecture hall there, opens fire. Five students shot and killed, eighteen others wounded.

A year later, the scene was an immigrant community center in upstate New York, a 41 year old man shoots and kills 11 people attending the center, plus two of the center's employees, before then killing himself.

Seven months after that an army psychiatrist walks onto an army base Fort Hood Texas. Thirteen people shot and killed, thirty others wounded.

And then last weekend in Tucson, Arizona, a 22 year old man shot and killed six people, including a federal judge and a nine year old little girl, and wounded fourteen others including a congress woman who was apparently the target of his attack.

[Transcribed from The Rachael Maddow Show, January 10, 2011]

**I John 3:18-24**

**John 8:31-38**

*“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”*

How are we to explain our violent ordering of the common life--what we have done with this good gift of life and what we have left undone--when at last we come face to face with the One who is the Lord and Giver of Life? That is the first question for the morning. And the second is simply, what are we therefore to be and do in the face of the unending litany of human carnage as followers of Jesus Christ? I want, for a few minutes, to step back from the rhetoric of the pundits and the politicians as together we try to think meaning into this moment from the perspective of God's Word become vulnerable and weak and foolish flesh in Jesus Christ.

To help us step back, I have turned to a friend of this congregation who is also one of the foremost theologians of our time, Robert Jenson. In 1971, a time awash in violence born of social change, Jenson was asked to attempt a systematic theology of violence. “The first thing we should have clear about violence,” he writes “if we want to understand it theologically, is that violence belongs to the reality of...word. It is an aspect of communication. Violent behavior is something we do in order to speak with each other, in order to get things across to each other....More particularly, violence is a phenomenon of the way in which our bodies participate in our communication with each other.”

Begin, then, with the reality of the word and with what words accomplish in our day to day lives. Think of the word that communicates to you by opening to you the future in a way the future would not have opened had that particular word not been said. “Every address of one [human being] to another poses to the hearer the possibility of becoming something other than he [or she] is,” says Jenson, poses “...a self [I] am not yet.” Take the words often said to us by Hurricane Schwartz: “The blizzard of the century is on the way.” His words pose for us a future in which we

move our bodies from the couch to the car to the grocery store. Suppose the doctor says to you, “I recommend surgery.” Her words have placed before you two possible futures, neither of which are in your control, but one of which you now must enter forever changed. Most astonishing, of course, is the word said to us every Sunday in this sanctuary. “‘Your sins are forgiven’ transforms the entire way the future stretches before us, no matter our past.” [Jens]

But all this happens in the context of our present selves and our world as it already is. “Thus,” says Jens in the second place, “we come to the *body* ....My body is me as I am now and already am, shaped and molded by what has been done by me and happened to me in the past.” When we communicate, we communicate a possible future to things [including ourselves as one of those things] as they are. Communication happens among creatures made in God’s image when “what we already are and what we may yet become come to rhyme with each other in our words.” Jens. I think of the word the angels spoke to the shepherds, just as they were, sending them running to Bethlehem and so into a future that never would have opened without the angel’s address. The “successful” word propels the persons we are now to become the persons we will be. We do not do this alone but together in communities that both accompany us and are transformed alongside of us.

I can think of no better example of this than the rhyming of word and body in the hospital room of Gabrielle Giffords. Remember the words spoken by her friends—of future pizza parties, of next summer in New Hampshire—words that posed a future to a body that moved, that squeezed a hand, then opened an eye, raised an arm, fondled a wedding ring. The community around the bed--of mother and father, friends, doctor, husband and wife--communicated, promising word and present body, such that a future was posed and accepted. Moreover why did the bodies assembled in the auditorium of the University of Arizona stand up and cheer at the news? Because you cannot take in such a new and unimaginable future without standing and cheering! It is why we stand and sing the *Gloria* after we have heard the promise of the gospel. I sometimes think if we ever really heard that word, we probably would also get up and dance on the pews!

So allow me what may seem like an aside here but is surely not. “*Liturgy*,” says Jens, “with its sitting, standing, parading, gesturing and so forth, is the most comprehensive *example* of the way in which the body belongs to our communication with each other.” Liturgy is the rhyming of word and body in which the Word of God, God’s address, poses a new future that causes the free turning of ourselves just as we are toward what is promised us in the Word become flesh.

But what of the other turn when word and body do not rhyme [in a marriage, between parent and child, in communities, in the halls of Congress], when I am unable to grasp or be claimed by “the future that you pose to me as mine and yet you or some third party insists that it *must* be mine....” The movement of our bodies that then occurs is what we call “violence. Violence happens when I want to say something to you that really cannot be said to you, that you are not in a position to hear, and when yet I insist that you are going to hear it. When my words do not move you, and yet I determine that you are going to move, then,” Jens so rightly observes, “we have violence.”

The future posed may be, indeed, the future for which I was made, like the rich young man to whom Jesus posed a future minus his many possessions. The future posed may be the future that I must refuse for all the right reasons, like the violence Jesus’ disciples offered to inflict in his name against his enemies. In each case, physical violence was averted by the decision to walk away sorrowfully or the choice of the disciples to obey.

As we well know, this is not always the case. I encourage you to go to [bradycampaign.org](http://bradycampaign.org) where you can monitor, in the upper right hand corner, the number of people shot so far this year in America. When I began to write this sermon, the number was just around 3600. Before I left my office to lead worship, the monitor registered over [ ], including [ ] bodies that have taken a bullet today alone. Curious that we routinely give the body count of Americans killed in Afghanistan every night on the news, but were the body count of those shot within our borders to be reported nightly to the electorate, I imagine that all hell would break loose! Could it be that the ones controlling the conversation have a stake in the proliferation of guns? Or could it be that the language of violence is so built into our vocabulary and syntax that we truly cannot connect our words with what happens to our bodies? Yet, insisted Jens in 1971, if the purpose of the language of violence is “to prevent us from trying to change the real world, to prevent the future from intruding, [then] in a society with such language, anyone with something to say is in a position where he [or she] will be driven increasingly to violence in the attempt to say it.”

What in the world are we to do as followers of the Word that became flesh, the Word that assumed our bodies and in his body revealed the future God poses to our sinful, sorry selves? In the first place, we must begin to recognize that to speak at all about the future posed to us in the Word made flesh is to enter the fray with our bodies, because the future we have glimpsed in him is “a future in absolute contradiction of every status quo, of everything that we are and of everything that our world is.” Let me be specific. One of our Communities for the Common Good is a community that exists to end gun violence. The name of the community itself poses a particular future that contradicts our ordering of the common life. The words are meant to invite all of us into that future because its opposite—a community for the promotion of gun violence—is unthinkable for rational people of faith. The name intends to make it possible for this community to move together into the future where gun violence has come to an end.

Long before last Saturday, last October to be exact, a half dozen members of this congregation met and soon invited other communities of faith in Northwest Philadelphia to join us as together we dared to dream that future for the city of Philadelphia. Presbyterians, Jews, Unitarians, Mennonites, Lutherans, Episcopalians, to name a few, have been learning about the way things are, about our bodies as they already are—vulnerable yet determined, about how it is that every murder, every suicide is real, about the deathly consequences of illegal trafficking in handguns, especially in the Northwest—the section of Philadelphia with the highest incidence of gun violence. Well aware of our present powerlessness in the statehouse or the halls of Congress, we knew our only hope resided in the words and bodily witness of those gathered in houses of worship. Back to liturgy!

The word spoken in those houses is a word which contradicts everything we presently are, and yet a word “to which we can respond liturgically,” says Jens [that is: respond in “the free, celebrating, turning of ourselves toward a future that opens, toward a promise that is made”]. Therefore we have invited communities of faith in Northwest Philadelphia, including this one, including you, to the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown on February 13 where we will respond liturgically to the future. We will begin with a litany for the families of those whose future has forever been changed because of gun violence; we will sing together of our hope; we will listen to poets whose words literally reorder the way we see; we will pray. Yet here’s the rub: the liturgy, says Jens, will itself be violent. What does he mean? I think he means that our words will speak of the utter overthrowing of all that is while our bodies are called to be nonviolent. He is saying that the body part of speaking such a word will translate into the love in truth and action that violates the world as it is

ordered.

Finally as in our liturgy we step into the fray, the liturgical action of freely turning bodies also must be taken into the streets. "I suggest that the church's mission," says Jens in the end, "—whatever its interior reality may be—is to function as a band of watchmen in the world who violently resist the way things are, but without hurting anybody, and so [who resist] *uselessly, pointlessly, playfully*, in honor of *God*." Already, two letters have been written to the owner of Delia's Gun Shop on Torresdale Avenue, inviting him into a future marked by a covenant, a promise to stop selling guns to straw buyers who, in turn, sell legally purchased guns illegally to persons in whose hands such guns become murderous weapons. We are praying for Mr. Delia and live in the hope that our words and bodies together might rhyme; that by grace he might walk with us into the future posed by our letter.

My guess is that he already has experienced our letters as letters of violence to life as he now lives it. If so, we will take our useless, pointless, playful liturgy to the sidewalk in front of his store. The word for what will happen in front of his store is a word with biblical roots. Being watchpersons, we will hold vigils rather than becoming vigilantes, vigils you are invited to join that will non-violently watch and wait for the future without gun violence to unfold. Moreover, we will determine so to act that if and when nonviolence lets loose violence, we will be the ones to suffer.

This is the witness that the violent liturgy of non-violent vigils makes in the world. It was the witness of the man whose birthday we honor this weekend because he was following another who suffered, who bore our violence on the cross and thereby inaugurated a future in which death has no dominion. Because death had no dominion over him, Martin Luther King, Jr., while sitting in Birmingham jail because of his liturgical action in the world, offered another litany, a radically different litany from the one with which we began. Just so in the words of his litany he posed a future to his fellow clergymen and poses that same future to us:

One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two year old woman in Montgomery Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness, 'My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest.' They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake.

May you and I, in the free, celebrating, turning of ourselves toward a promise that is made; may we who would love not only in word and speech but in truth and action; may we more and more bear witness in a violent world to the future posed in God's Word become vulnerable and weak and foolish flesh in Jesus Christ. Amen.