



*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 1 Corinthians 13:1*

February 14 is both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. The last time these two converged was 2018. I remember it vividly, because it was the day that a 19-year-old male entered Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, killed seventeen people, and injured an additional seventeen. Seared in my brain is a photo of a parent outside the school holding another parent with an ash cross on her forehead (photo found here: https://s.abcnews.com/images/US/parkland-florida-school-shooting-03-ap-jc-180214_3x2_1600.jpg?w=1600). It is a poignant image of "you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Every year, when my own children come forward to receive the ashes, I find myself fighting back tears as I apply the cross to their head and say those words. Of course, I know that this life is a fleeting gift and the eternity promised by Jesus Christ is waiting for all of us, and yet, I also know that as a mother, I am biologically wired to ensure the survival of my offspring. That moment when we stand together in acknowledgement that even their lives will someday end, is so full of holy tension that a little bit slips out of my tear ducts.

No parent should have to outlive their child. This is something on which almost everyone agrees. Even those of us that fervently believe in an eternity with no more pain and no more sorrow (Rev. 21:4), agree that a good long life should come first. And yet, despite the general agreement that children should make it to adulthood, we as a society can't seem to find a way to protect them in their schools.

Growing up in inner-city schools, I was raised with the idea that only "bad guys" had guns – mainly gang members. For people in my high school, anyone suspected of owning a gun was shunned as an unsavory character. I also had uncles that hunted, but it was obvious that hunting guns were very different than the guns meant to kill people. In fact, my uncle Sonny and his sons often enjoyed hunting with cross bows. It was a sport for them that also ensured they had plenty of meat for their families. Never once did it occur to me that someone might show up at my high school and commit mass murder. It wasn't even on my radar.

A lot of this is due to a Supreme Court decision in 2008, *District of Columbia vs. Heller*, which removed many state and city rights to control the who, when, and how of gun ownership. Four years later, a young man would enter Sandy Hook Elementary school and kill 28 people – most of them children. Mass shootings have been steadily increasing every year since with the only break coming in 2020, when mass gatherings weren't really happening¹. Efforts to pass local gun laws are severely hampered by the *Heller* decision. And efforts to pass Federal laws are severely hampered by well-funded lobbyists and information campaigns.

I am not writing this to try and convince anyone of any specific answer. In fact, I don't know enough about guns myself to suggest any solutions. On top of that, my overwhelming fear for my kids very well may cloud my perspective on what is best for the community as a whole. I believe, that the issue is much too complex for *anyone* to provide a simple answer. It will look very different to someone from rural America, suburbia, or the inner-city.

What I do know is that we absolutely will not see any improvement without real conversations between knowledgeable gun owners, victims of gun violence, sociologists, mental health practitioners, lawyers, and various other experts. Those conversations must be had with respect for differing experiences, perspectives, and actual facts.

I don't agree with Scalia's interpretation on the second amendment. Many lawyers, judges, and even his contemporary justices didn't and don't agree with his interpretation. But, even if he was spot-on with the original intent of the constitution, as Christians, we are never obligated to follow any human law before that of God Almighty. And what are the two greatest commandments? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and might and your neighbor as yourself. If we enter into any conversation, if we advocate or lobby for *any* laws, without love, then our words are merely "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" and no one is willing to listen to that.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811487/number-of-mass-shootings-in-the-us/>