

“How Long, O Lord?”

*Psalm 23 and Psalm 13*

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Last Tuesday evening, I went to my 18-year-old son Chris’s last high school orchestra concert. Next weekend, we will attend his last performance with Debut Theatre at the Lincoln Center. And at the end of the month, we will celebrate his graduation from Rocky Mountain High School. These are the typical celebratory events for seniors in high school, and of course, they are tinged with both pride and melancholy as we see him grow up. That is as it should be. (And on this Mother’s Day, Chris will hopefully remember to buy a card for his mom.... Yes, I reminded him.)

Today will be a different kind of Mother’s Day for Maria Castillo, whose son, Kendrick, died in a school shooting on Tuesday in Highlands Ranch. I cannot imagine the pain his mom is feeling today, and that she will feel every Mother’s Day for the rest of her life. The day my son Chris was playing French horn, Kendrick Castillo, also an 18-year-old senior, threw himself into the line of fire as bullets flew in his high school. Chris will get to finish out his senior year and graduate, but there will be at least one absence in the graduation at STEM Charter School in Highlands Ranch.

One day last month, every school in Poudre School District was closed because of what the FBI called a “credible threat” of a school shooting. Those of us with kids or grandkids in school, those who are or love teachers and kids, how long will we let this go on?

How long, O Lord, how long? How long will we be part of a society that is rooted in the myth of redemptive violence? How long will people who call themselves Christians tolerate violence as a means to settle disputes? How long will we tolerate politicians who are addicted to the cash provided by the gun lobby? How long will we live in a nation that cannot acknowledge that we have an enormous mental health crisis?

It’s not just about gun control legislation...but that’s a place to start. It’s not just about teaching conflict-resolution skills to kids...but that’s a place to start. It’s not enough for us to say “No more school shootings!” and to get out on the streets...but that’s a place to start. It’s not enough to try and remove the stigma from people who have mental health challenges...but it’s a place to start.

How long will we as Christians tolerate the status quo? School shootings have become so common that this week’s tragedy wasn’t even the lead story on NPR or in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.

What is the first thing that comes into your mind when I say, “Columbine?” We live in a place that helped equate the name of our state flower with school shootings. We live in a state where the shootings at New Life Church in Colorado Springs in 2007 failed to put all Christians on notice that we need to address the prevalence of guns in our society and their use in violent crime. We live in a state where a movie theater shooting in 2012 left 12 people dead. And here we are again with another tragic shooting in a Colorado school. *Fortune* magazine identified the top ten Congressmen who have

benefited most from NRA funding; among those ten are one of our two senators and the representative who serves Windsor and Greeley.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, I do want to cry out to God and say “How long, O Lord?! How long?!” And because I know that God acts through us, I want to say to myself and to each of you, “How long, God’s people?! How long?!” How long are we going to tolerate politicians who bury their heads in the ground when there is a shooting? How long are we going to tolerate the gun lobby calling the shots in Washington, DC? How long are we going to perpetuate an ingrained system of hyper-competitiveness and hyper-busyness for our kids? How long are we going to avoid talking about mental health and refuse to remove the shroud of shame from those who suffer from mental illness.

Kendrick Castillo and his family are in my thoughts and prayers. But ours is an engaged faith; a faith in which prayer leads to commitment and commitment leads to action. So, by all means, pray for the Castillo family and the students and families of STEM Charter School...and pray for the families of the two young people who did the shooting. And don’t forget to take the next step and engage your faith in action.

We are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, my friends. It is a valley where the stench of death should affect us on a visceral level. The stench is in the offices of lawmakers who refuse to open their eyes to what is happening, because they are being paid to look the other way. The stench is in an industry that wants to make more handguns and semiautomatic weapons available because they see that the fear of Americans can help them make a profit. The stench hangs on us who can use our influence to affect a change in our culture and in our politics, but we don’t because we are too busy earning a living, or we’re complacent, or we’ve given up hope.

If Christian and Jews, who claim to believe in the message of the Psalms, are convinced that we have no reason to fear the shadow of death, because God and God’s rod and staff are with us, then why are we afraid to do something dramatic? Isn’t it incumbent upon us as people of faith, especially Christians in the majority faith, to do something to remedy the situation that confronts us?

After the shooting in Parkland High School in 2018, we organized a Ministry Team and many of you went to a march in Old Town Square. And that was a great show of support, but it wasn’t sustainable, and here we find ourselves again.

As your senior pastor, I’m issuing a challenge to the members of this church to do something. Yes, pray fervently! You who write letters to politicians, write! You who organize ministry teams, organize! Those of you who write checks, give! And we need to work with others in the community and nation to create a sea-change, because we cannot do it alone. Your clergy will empower you in whatever ways we can...but this has to have grass roots support within the congregation in order to be sustained. So, let’s get to work...let’s involve ourselves in ministry. If you want something concrete to do, go to a meeting of a community group, Moms Demand Action, at Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church on Lemay Avenue on Monday, May 20 at 6:30 p.m. And if you all want to form a Plymouth Ministry Team to support that effort, we can help make that happen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://fortune.com/2018/02/15/nra-contributions-politicians-senators/>

I gave Chris an especially big hug on Wednesday night. And it is certainly because I'll miss having him here at home when he heads out on a gap year. But as I looked at the big six-foot-three frame I thought to myself...it could have been Chris and not Kendrick.

Let's work to end this scourge and help to create a culture in which the stench of violence is replaced by the bright light of resurrection.

May it be so. Amen.

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