



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 8, 2017

Whole Food

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (John 4:34).

Town Hall South began its new season on Tuesday. For 49 years, talented teams of women, mostly from Westminster Church, have brought prominent, insightful speakers to enrich the life of our South Hills community. Tuesday’s lecturer was actress Marlee Matlin, who won an Oscar at the age of 21 for her performance in *Children of a Lesser God*. She’s charming, energetic, engaging, and funny; and part – but only a part – of what makes her so interesting is that she’s been deaf since childhood, as the result of an illness she suffered before she was two. She gave the most fascinating hour-long talk I never heard from the speaker herself, as her signing was rendered aloud by her long-time interpreter, Jack.

One of Marlee Matlin’s main themes is that deaf people can do everything anybody else can do, except hear. She helped stimulate the law that made closed captioning available on television, but she insists that our focus should always be on the *abilities* people have, not their *disabilities*, and we need to be careful about all kinds of stereotypes. Among the less thoughtful responses to her own situation, she tells of being on an airplane when a flight attendant found out she was deaf and brought her a menu in Braille. She’s also been offered wheelchairs at the airport, by people who were similarly confused but trying to be helpful.

Marlee has managed to succeed so well in life, in part because of her own drive and determination, but also because of the support of people like her parents and the actor Henry Winkler, whom many of remember as the Fonz

on *Happy Days*. She met Henry when she was less than 12 years old, and told him through an interpreter that she wanted to be an actress. He told her she could be anything she wanted to be, and Henry Winkler has been a beloved mentor to Marlee Matlin ever since. She and her husband were even married on the lawn of the Winklers' home.

Marlee Matlin's presentation came in the context of the great tragedy we've all been trying to process this week, the mass shooting of nearly 500 people, and the killing of 58, at a country music concert in Las Vegas. The whole nation is horrified, and rightly so, but of course we've been here before. This sort of thing happens all too frequently in America. The number of victims is higher this time, but the basic story is the same: a man with an arsenal of guns opens fire on a crowd of innocent people, killing and wounding as many as he can in as short a time as possible.

The reactions from various quarters are entirely familiar by now too. Many people ask, for the hundredth time, is there nothing we can do to reduce the risk and extensiveness of this kind of violence? Are there no more sensible limits to be placed on the kinds of weapons that might fall into the hands of people who will do evil things? And predictably, the answer from the other side is No, there really isn't much more to be done if we care about the Second Amendment, except to arm even more people because, as they say, "The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," and after all, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Besides, we're told, "Now is not the time" to talk about guns, since that would "politicize" the tragedy. In the meantime they say, as

they always say, our hearts and prayers go out to the victims and their families.

If recent history is any indication, pretty soon that will be the end of it, with the possible exception of making “bump stocks” illegal – until the next time something like this happens, and the whole cycle will repeat itself. And there *will* be a next time, because as long as conditions remain the same, the results will be the same.

But is this really the best we can do? Are we just stuck indefinitely in this never-ending cycle of horrific violence?

My purpose this morning is not to focus only on gun violence per se, but to look at this most recent tragedy while it’s fresh in our minds by way of considering how we think and talk about such things, and to lift up briefly a perspective that our Christian faith can bring to these kinds of issues.

Let’s start with the dynamics that so often freeze people in their own positions and paralyze any potential for making progress. The National Rifle Association has something like five million members, and no doubt a great many of them, perhaps the overwhelming majority, are decent, thoughtful individuals who are as upset about criminal violence as anyone else, though for various reasons they support the NRA’s campaign to protect what they believe to be the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms – including the kinds of weapons that have been used to commit terrible crimes. I know some of those people, and I know how thoughtful they are.

At the same time, the NRA gets its support not only from individuals but also from gun manufacturers that donate millions of dollars annually to the organization, so that the NRA becomes a kind of marketing arm for gun makers and dealers. I have a background in policy analysis, and a first principle is always to follow the money, asking who benefits from any particular situation or proposal. Whatever the merits of the arguments, it's obvious that promoting gun ownership, and claiming that the solution to gun violence is more guns, and scaring people with the claim that the government wants to take away their guns, and framing all this in the language of patriotism and defending the Constitution, has the effect of increasing sales and profits for gun makers and dealers. Just look at the stock market charts of gun manufacturers and you'll see how that works. And, of course, the NRA contributes millions of dollars each year to influence many of our congressional and state representatives, and to attack anyone who tries to resist their agenda. The gun lobby is one of the most powerful special interests in America.

Then there are the dismissive stereotypes of people on all sides of these debates. Gun control advocates often fail to take the concerns of the other side seriously, and the same is true in the opposite direction. I read the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* every day, and at least three news magazines every week, trying to be well-informed not only about the facts but also about opinions from different perspectives. The news pages of the *Journal* on Thursday featured moving profiles of some of those who were killed at the concert, but then the lead editorial began by saying, "... progressives believe that every human problem can be solved with a policy tweak. A ban here, a

background check there, and, voila, no more mass shootings. But American life and human depravity don't always bend to government dictates."¹

That editorial comment is an example of the silly stereotypes and straw man arguments that are all too common in these public discussions. I don't know anyone who thinks that every human problem can be solved with a policy tweak, and no one has a deeper sense of human depravity and sin than we Christian ministers. Straw man arguments make fun of dumb ideas attributed to opponents, when in fact the opponents don't believe those things; and people can get away with that kind of caricature only in echo chambers of like-minded folk, where there's no thoughtful voice from the other side to challenge them. So much of our media these days represents only one side of an issue, and if all you listen to are those sources, it's easy to lose any sense of how insightful the other side might be.

There are other fallacies at work in the gun debates as well. One argument seems to be that no matter what you do, you can't stop all the killings, therefore you shouldn't do anything that might prevent some of them – except sell more guns to law-abiding citizens. But what sense does that make? The medical profession doesn't say, "We can't heal all your diseases or control all your behavior, so we won't treat any of your illness or encourage you to live a healthier lifestyle." Parents don't tell their children, "I can't protect you from everything that might happen, so I won't do anything to try to keep you safe." In most areas of our lives we don't let the impossibility of perfection stop us from doing whatever

¹ *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2017.

good we can. Why should it be any different when so many people's lives are stake?

Then there's the red herring that says guns don't kill people, people kill people, and if bad guys didn't use guns they'd use some other weapon instead. But the fact is that guns are used in roughly twice as many homicides as all other weapons combined in America, and the shooter last week could not have killed 58 people and wounded hundreds more in a few minutes from 32 stories up across the street unless he had an arsenal of rapid-fire, large magazine rifles. As for the suggestion that more people carrying guns is the answer, if every single person attending that concert had been carrying a gun, what difference would it have made in this case? And to the notion that law-abiding citizens can be trusted with these kinds of weapons: the shooter in Las Vegas was a law-abiding citizen, too, until he wasn't. The simple truth is, it was the availability of those weapons that made the massacre possible.

Addressing the problems of gun violence in America is complicated, to be sure. There are no easy answers, and no matter what we do, we won't be able to prevent all the violence. But what won't help us at all is the combination of false stereotypes, overheated rhetoric, and denial of plain facts that so often paralyze any discussion of public issues.

And that, I think, is where the church comes in. The church is a body of disciples of Jesus Christ, who says we are to do all that we can to care for other people. While some people feed on prejudices and stereotypes and self-interest, Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." He makes that comment

when his disciples urge him to eat something because he just spent lunch time talking with a Samaritan woman – the kind of person who fit enough stereotypes that Jesus’ disciples thought he should not be bothered with the likes of her. And yet, Jesus’ conversation with that Samaritan woman resulted in the conversion of many people from her village.

There may be churches that avoid hard topics and fall back on safe platitudes, content to pray for victims of disasters without ever asking what might be done to limit those disasters. There may be churches that simply take a side in the culture wars and dismiss other people with straw man stereotypes instead of trying to understand them. There may be churches that think the gospel is only about getting individual souls to heaven and has nothing to do with the way we live in society here and now. But if there are such churches, it seems to me that they ignore a great deal of the gospel itself. I have no interest in being part of that kind of church, and neither do many people, especially young people, who don’t come to church now because they think it’s irrelevant to the real world; but they might come if they found a church that takes Jesus and his expectations seriously.

I want to be part of that kind of church: a church that cares less about reinforcing tribal loyalties and self-interest than helping people do the hard work of following Jesus. Jesus insists on telling the truth, and I want to be part of a church where people long to hear the truth, even when it makes them uncomfortable. I want to be part of a church that puts its faith in God, and trusts that God will prevail in the end, and strives in the meantime to love God with all

their heart and mind and soul, and love their neighbors as themselves. That kind of church would be the most meaningful and the most spiritually powerful force in the world. That kind of church would feed on the whole food of God – the living Word of Christ, who calls us all to share in God’s redeeming, reconciling work in this world. And this congregation, like every other congregation, needs to decide which kind of church we want to be.



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