

SERMON TITLE: "What Can We Do?"
SERMON TEXT: Philippians 3:2-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 12, 2017, at First UMC—Veterans' Sunday

INTRODUCTION

I don't know about you, but this week has felt weird to me. At the very same time that we've been honoring our veterans for their service to our country, we've been saddened and angered that a former airman killed 26 people in a Baptist Church last Sunday. At the same time that we have rallied in support of the various branches of the military which keep us safe, we have this profound sense of vulnerability, that maybe we'll never be safe—not in the workplace, not in school, not in the public square, not even in church.

Because we aren't in agreement about how to prevent these acts of violence, or even about what causes them to occur, it seems like we just wring our hands *again*, pray *again* for the wounded and grieving, and once *again* feel impotent to do anything about it. Because last Sunday's shooting happened in a church, this one's been harder for me to put out of my mind. Early in the week I found myself talking with some of our Trustees about a safety plan for our church. If something terrible like that happened here, would we be prepared? How would we manage the emergency?

Apparently I wasn't the only church leader asking these questions. Midweek, I received an email link to an article titled, "Churches and Gun Violence: 7 Practical Preparation Tips." The seven tips came "from Rev. Derrek Belase, a former certified police officer turned pastor, with two degrees in criminology . . . Derrek believes that you can't completely prevent gun violence from erupting, even with the best laid plans or the best legislation." But he did give seven fairly simple and practical ideas that included the importance of establishing relationships with first responders, training ushers to be more alert, and being mindful of the church building. Suggestion number six was to avoid expensive security plans that that would "ratchet up [both] expectations and fears." Then the final item on his list was to

focus on what we're here to do: worship God, preach the gospel, give people hope, provide opportunities for spiritual growth, and reach out in mission to the community and the world.¹ The bottom line was that, while there's no absolute way to prevent violence or guarantee our survival, there are a number of important things we people of faith can do to improve our quantity and quality of life.

That positive note connects us to our scripture reading from Philippians, a letter the Apostle Paul wrote under threat to his life. He had been imprisoned for preaching about Christ. Yet, somehow—in spite of that state of punishment, limitation, and deprivation—Paul was able to write an amazingly joyful, thankful, and optimistic letter. Let's dig into chapter four and discover Paul's answers to the question, "In the face of adversity, what can we do?"

1—WE CAN IMPROVE OUR OWN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Paul's suggestion number one is that, in times of trouble, we can improve our own personal relationships. In verses two and three, Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to get along. Those two women were co-workers with Paul, Clement, and others in the church in Philippi. But, apparently, the two women were in some kind of conflict, and it was causing problems not only for them but for the entire Philippian congregation. It's hard to have an appealing witness in the community and do good mission work in the world when you're locked in battle with your closest associates.

In Philippians 2:2, Paul had urged the Christians at Philippi to "be of the same mind, having the same love." He urged them to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" and "to look not to [their] own interests but to the interests of others." Paul then pointed to the example of Christ, who humbled himself on the cross, so that grace and forgiveness might fill our hearts and become our Christian practice. You know the lyrics, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." We're a lot less likely to have wars between nations and violent extremists when we each take seriously the importance and possibility of improving our own personal relationships.

2—WE CAN TRUST IN GOD

In verses 4-7, we see Paul's second suggestion for what we can do in troubled times. We can trust in God. Paul speaks of this with different words. He tells us to rejoice. He reminds us that the Lord is near and that we shouldn't worry. He suggests that we should be thankful. He tells us to let our requests be known to God, who will guard our hearts and minds.

In this week after the Texas church shooting, some congregations are calling for armed security guards or pistol-packing parishioners. But law enforcement officers caution that too many guns can create cross-fire injuries. And when the professionals arrive on the scene of an active shooter, they don't immediately know if those holding weapons are the good guys or bad guys.² I'll grant you that the Apostle Paul lived a long time before guns, but I still like his advice. Because God will take care of us, we don't have to be worried or fearful. We don't have to react rashly or violently. We can let our gentleness be known to everyone. We can trust in God.

3—WE CAN LIFT OUR THOUGHTS, WORDS, & ACTIONS TO A HIGHER PLANE

In verses 8 and 9, the Apostle Paul suggests a third thing we can do in times of adversity. We can lift our thoughts, words, and actions to a higher plane. Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise—think about these things. Get your mind out of the gutter. Stop telling lies and distorting the truth. Treat people with respect.

If everyone would seek to take the higher road, the purer path, the better way, imagine how much safer our world would be. If everyone curtailed their own greed, deceit, and abuse of other human beings, imagine how much healthier and happier everyone could be. The recent barrage of sexual misconduct cases in the news indicates yet again that we human beings are all too prone to behave at the lowest levels. Imagine what a safer world we'd live in if, instead of putting ourselves and other people down, we used our energy and power to raise ourselves and others up. The peace of God will be with us when we lift our thoughts, words, and actions to a higher plane.

4—ACCEPT HELP

In verses 10-14, Paul gives us a fourth and final suggestion. In times of trouble, we can accept help. Now, I have to say that this might have been the hardest part for Paul himself. With all his talk about being content even when in need or hungry, you can tell that he wasn't one to seek much help. He obviously preferred to be self-sufficient. With the strength of God, Paul was sure he could manage OK, and that can-do philosophy of life probably served him well most of the time. But if we read these verses carefully, we can also see that Paul really did appreciate the help that the Philippian Christians offered to him. He rejoiced that they had revived their concern for him and now, finally, had had an opportunity to show it by sending some gifts. He told them it was "kind" of them to share in his "distress."

Did you hear that? Paul actually admitted that he had been in distress. He admitted that it was good to get some help. Admission of need was no fatal flaw. Acceptance of the Philippians' help was necessary for both the quantity and quality of his life.

Whether we're active military, veterans, or lifelong civilians, we too can benefit from accepting help. Sure, we can try to tough it out and get by on our own, but sometimes we really do need assistance. That can include practical and material help like disability benefits or the physical care provided in the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home. It can include social encouragement through friends, family, and veterans groups. It can include spiritual faith formation like we receive here at church. The help we need can also include mental health care that we gain through counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. If we ever find that our thoughts are stuck in dark places, if we ever recognize that we're obsessing about control or revenge, if we ever notice that fear is keeping us awake at night, if we ever find ourselves reacting in rage, if we ever realize that we are contemplating hurting ourselves or other people—then we need to seek some professional help and do it quickly.

There should be no shame in requesting and receiving help in order to stop something worse from happening. Danger, temptations, and trouble are present in the world around us. We may not be able to prevent those threats from existing. But we aren't powerless. We can do something. We can accept help.

CONCLUSION

When I was a teenager I learned an old hymn that goes well with this message.

My heart has no desire to stay
where doubts arise and fears dismay.
Though some may dwell where these abound,
my prayer, my aim, is higher ground.
Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
by faith, on heaven's table land.
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.³

In times of national distress and in times of personal trauma, it's easy for us to be overwhelmed and discouraged. When our society is divided about the causes and answers to these problems, it's frustrating to all of us. We feel like there's nothing we can do. But there is. In the power of God's strength, we can improve our own personal relationships. We can trust in God. We can lift our thoughts, words, and actions to a higher plane. We can accept help. Yes, there are important things that we can do.

¹ Rebekah Simon Peter, November 7, 2017,
<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8520/churches-and-gun-violence-7-practical-preparation-tips>

² http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/churches-bear-down-on-safety-after-texas-attack?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWkRCaFpHRTRZekUwTUdRNSIsInQiOiJUNzRFWHVMNmxJcEZmZGV4TUvYyN0pWSm1OZXZMeFhwcm9YVXg1aWxkNFZ4eWhXQmJJMFJrVXJkUXRqT0h3RkFCUGlheDM4RFpJN3ViUURGR095NEs5dGJYbGIRNlwwWXcwdGd5bDNrbHA1WUF0NDJDa1RxMG53T3Z3TFwvRzI1ZlJ2In0%3D

³Johnson Oatman, Jr., "Higher Ground," 1898.