

Learning to Let Go
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Romans 6:1-14

She was my worst boss... let's call her Janelle. Temperamental? Yup. Made me walk on eggshells? Absolutely. But I needed the money; and working in the demanding field of sports & entertainment marketing paid for our student loans and steep childcare bills.

I remember how, at our weekly team meetings, Janelle would select one person to treat like a total loser who wasn't doing anything right and was going to bring the entire team down. She'd also have in mind one person who she'd gush compliments upon, like they had somehow single-handedly saved the industry.

It was like full-on hazing in casual business attire.

You never knew who was going to be the victim or victor, so we all dreaded the meeting. Once you realized you weren't going to be picked on that week, you might breathe a sigh of relief for a second, but then you felt just horrible for the person who was the victim. The only thing worse than being THAT person was to be the one who was abundantly praised!

Not surprisingly, there wasn't a lot of substance behind why an individual was being selected; it was just my boss Janelle's management technique.

Now I want you to think, just for a minute, about a boss you might have had that you no longer do. Picture in your mind that person coming up to you today, to your work or home, and yelling at you *"Get to work! I want this report done and on my desk by 8 am in the morning, and I don't care if you have to work through the night, just do it!"*

What would you do? Some of you are thinking... I'm sitting here in church, so I can't tell you what I'd do! You'd probably say something like, *"Listen, things have changed, our relationship has changed, you can't tell me what to do anymore, you do not have any authority over me!"*

That is exactly the message that the Apostle Paul wants to communicate to his readers in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans. He was compelled to say these things to the church in Rome because some clown was teaching that since they were saved by grace and God had completely dealt with their sins they could continue to sin so that grace might increase.

It was like these false teachers were saying... *"Sin it up! You are already forgiven. It really doesn't matter. God will forgive you anyway. Besides, it gives grace a chance to operate in your life. The more you sin the more grace you get."*

Party on, right? But Paul knew better than to abuse the gift of grace.

Sin is a topic that many people nowadays feel uncomfortable with. Part of this discomfort, I'm sure, is to avoid personal feelings of guilt and shame. None of us, with the exception of small babies and children, get through this life without making some mistakes that can be categorized as "sin". Depending on where you fall on the theological spectrum, discomfort can also be caused by the (mis)use of the term and judgment which has been spread historically by the dominant voices in our religious and political landscape.

We might think about sin, instead, as a disruption of Shalom. Shalom is the web of our relationships with God, others, creation, and ourselves. It is defined by love, justice, and joy. Shalom is the world defined by loving God and others. It is the kingdom of God.

Evil, then, is anything that disrupts shalom. Sin is specifically the things we do to disrupt it, personally and corporately, as well as our state of being where sinful actions are natural. Placed in this context, God's law is meant to point us towards a community and life defined by shalom – God's peace.

So, yes, sin is the violation of God's law, but more deeply it is the disruption of shalom. The work of God in Jesus is to establish shalom (the kingdom of God), both now (in part) and in the future (fully). Now, we receive forgiveness and reconciliation, the love of God, to experience in part. In the future, we will experience God's shalom completely.

Seeing sin as a disruption of God's shalom, and not just a violation of God's legal code, makes it easier (for me) to see the connection between grace and ethical behavior. We are citizens of God's kingdom, but we are also called to spread God's love. That's our job. And, we cannot spread God's love by words alone, but by living this love for God, others, creation, and ourselves. We need to behave as if we believe this to be a reality and not just a pipe dream.

Will we still falter now and then? Sure, we are only human. The lure is there for us all to think about - but the choice is ours to make. We are all free to follow our own lead or the lead of God. Most of us are smart enough to create elaborate justifications for virtually any action or inaction we choose. Holding on to old patterns is a lot more comfortable. Most people prefer to do things the way they always have.

But when we do that, we get caught in a cycle of despair. That, I believe, is what is at the core of our nation's inability to counter the scourge of gun violence. When I think about systemic sin, that is one of the places my mind goes. We simply cannot accept the toll of gun violence as the norm and sink in despair. We've got to get out of this rut our culture is in, and learn to let go of our differences, and come together to form a reasonable solution.

Churches around the country are praying for the lives lost this weekend in Virginia Beach, a community that has joined a long list of others affected by pain, tragedy and loss. Ending this madness is a moral imperative, perhaps the biggest one of the 21st century. It is a sin. Changing our pattern is imperative, for our safety and the safety of our children.

Yes, I know the context of gun violence is complex – no one piece of legislation can address it. But we know that we have the means to reduce gun violence. Our culture has such a heavy investment in violence and death; isn't it time we invested in life and hope?

This is our faith call.

The goal, for all of us, always, is to become more like the person of Jesus, portrayed for us in the gospels. Maybe that means becoming less self-focused or more keenly dedicated to God's will and the needs of others around us. Spreading God's Shalom. What holds us back?

As Christians we are called to peacemaking. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, there are calls for peace. To turn Spears into pruning hooks, swords into plowshares... these were the weapons of mass casualty of Jesus' day. Guns are the weapons of mass casualty in ours. The Bible may not speak with one voice about why suffering happens, but it is unanimous in its claim that human suffering demands the active response of faithful people.

We can talk to our family members and friends: if they have guns, do they keep them unloaded, locked up and away from where children can find them. If we own guns, do we practice good gun safety? And we can pray for change. Change in hearts, change in minds towards compassion and care for those who will die in gun violence and a willingness to put that first instead of our fear.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells his readers to reflect on such virtues:

Whatever is true

Whatever is just

Whatever is commendable

Whatever has excellence and is worthy of praise

Keep on doing it. Keep hanging on. For the faith journey is long. And the road of peacemaking is long. And the fight for justice is long. And the discussion about gun violence will be long.

But the God of peace will be with us. When we are ready to let go of our old ways, and let God lead us in the direction of peace, we must trust in God's love. Trust that there is a better way! Trust that God walks with us, helping do us accomplish together what we cannot do on our own. Amen.