Can we agree about gun *safety*?

By Heidi Haverkamp
October 5, 2015

On the radio last week, I heard a police officer being interviewed about the shootings in his town of Roseberg, Oregon. He said something like, “We’re just in shock. Things like this always happen somewhere else, not in a town like ours.”

I was surprised to hear this. I take it for granted that, someday, a public shooting is going to happen in a town, school, or church near me, maybe at a time when I happen to be there. “I’ll see you tonight,” I have found myself saying to my husband, “if I don’t get shot.”

Shootings are grossly relatable. They happen in the most ordinary communities across the nation, and in the most ordinary of places: classrooms, movie theaters, workplaces, shopping centers, churches.

Each time, my reaction is quite different from that of the officer in Roseberg. “It could’ve been here,” I think. “It could’ve been me.”

Public shootings, as President Obama has noted, have become part of our national landscape. No matter where we live or how we feel about guns, we should not doubt that a shooting can happen in a place we know well, to someone we love, even to ourselves. Across our nation, we have this in common.

What we do not have in common is how we feel about guns. And it is not events or tragedies that change the world; it’s feelings and ideas. Each public shooting reanimates a frenzy of indignation, insults, fear, and blame, on social media and in the press. Two distinct cultures are pitted squarely against each other: gun control culture and Second Amendment culture. And as Jesus and then Abraham Lincoln noted, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.”

St. Benedict, my congregation’s patron saint, built his monastic communities on a foundation of moderation and love. In any movement to reduce gun deaths, we

would do well to imitate his practice of community relations, civil discourse, and education. As Nicholas Kristof notes, 60 percent of gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides, and “more preschoolers are shot dead each year (82 in 2013) than police officers in the line of duty (27 in 2013).” Americans, whether part of Second Amendment culture or gun control culture, long for a safer nation. Can we find a way to love each other—to love our “enemy”—enough to see that perhaps we aren’t enemies after all?

Inspired by Kristof’s article, I wonder if it would help to pursue a campaign for gun *safety* rather than gun *control.* Cars have been made much, much safer over the last few decades with the rise of seatbelt laws, air bags, and safety glass, greatly reducing the number of deaths in car accidents. Guns could also be made safer. They could be made to fire only with a fingerprint ID, or with bullet casings that are microstamped for tracing. Car insurance and drivers’ licenses have become ubiquitous and easy; these same protections could be instituted for guns in such a way that Americans of both cultures felt comfortable, even enthusiastic.

“Gun safety” affirms gun use while simultaneously promoting the idea that guns and public places can be safer for everyone. Much as many of us would like it to be untrue, guns are a widespread part of American culture. But public shootings, accidental gun deaths, and handgun suicides don’t have to be.