

God's hands that stop gun violence

What if we did the work of God in the world?

by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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My toddler lay snuggled up in my lap yesterday for a post-church nap when my husband came in quietly. "Another shooting. In Texas, at a church. Twenty-six people dead," Josh whispered, horrified, shaking his head.

What could I say? "Jesus." The despair settled across my chest, tightening my breathing like third-trimester heartburn, but I couldn't say much else. This keeps happening. Dozens of people, all the time. It will keep happening until we do something about the millions of guns accessible in this country. What else is there to say?

Josh went back to our other girls downstairs. I stroked Hattie's hair while attempting to plan for the kids' workshop I'd be leading back at church that night. Fifty-two kids from the community were gathering to learn about hunger, to paint soup bowls, to hear from local hunger ministries and assemble jars of dry soup ingredients to

donate.

As the evening's activities began, I asked groups of elementary and middle-school kids to tell me about their experience of hunger. *Why do our bodies need food? Are some things harder to do when you haven't had enough to eat? What do you do when you're hungry? Did you know that some people don't have enough to eat? Why might they not have enough?*

I gave the big kids in each group a page from [this curriculum](#), and I paraphrased Exodus 16 for the younger ones. *Can I hear your best grumbling and complaining? They loved the visual of bread raining from heaven. Have you ever seen such a thing? That doesn't seem to be the way God feeds hungry people these days.*

Despite the absurdity of divine daily manna, we decided that God cares that people are hungry and wants to be sure everyone has enough to eat. But if there's no bread raining from heaven, how will people get fed?

Later, after church and dinner and getting the kids to bed, I crawled into bed beside Josh, who was glued to his phone. "Do we know why?" I asked. "Who?" A vet with a dishonorable discharge and a history of domestic violence. We tried to get to sleep.

This morning, I saw Facebook posts from some friends from the church of my adolescence, Al and David Braden. Their uncle died in the shooting, and their aunt and her granddaughter were seriously injured. To be honest, my first thought was disbelief that this is the first time I know someone who has lost a family member to a mass shooting. These things happen all the time now. We're all connected, as kin, as [Father Greg Boyle](#) reminds us. We're supposed to remember that, even before it is literally true.

Al and David's cousin Rebecca was [interviewed](#), and she is so articulate in her grief. She talks about the church and what it has been to their family. She speaks of her father. "It's just surreal," she says. "This is a small town. This doesn't happen here."

But, increasingly, it happens everywhere. Nowhere is safe.

This morning when I dropped my daughter off at the church's preschool, a few of the teachers wanted to talk. *It's so awful that it happened in a church. The one place you want to feel safe, that should be safe when times are bad.* Yes, I replied. But all these places should be safe: churches and schools and movies and concerts and

offices and streets.

Al is a veteran. He wrote,

When I deployed to Iraq, I was never shot at with direct weapons. My heart fills with rage that the same cannot be said about my family members when they were in a church in Texas, or strangers vacationing in Nevada, or watching a movie in Colorado, or children and their teachers in school in Connecticut, or folks just going about their lives every single day in Chicago. Don't tell us that this is a mental health problem and not a gun problem. They aren't mutually exclusive.

Thoughts and prayers? While welcome, they aren't enough.

I was struck when [I read about First Baptist member John Holcombe](#), whose pregnant wife Crystal and several other family members were among those killed. John teaches Sunday school and often posts on Facebook about his upcoming lessons. Last week, he was planning to teach on the manna passage in Exodus 16.

At my church, after establishing with our kids that God doesn't usually provide bread from heaven these days, we read [In God's Hands](#), a wonderful retelling of a story from Jewish tradition of two men, rich and poor, who believe in miracles but come to discover that miracles more often than not exist in the work we do as God's hands. We must feed the hungry. We must listen for God.

As I finished the book, a 9-year-old, sandy-haired boy I didn't know asked me earnestly, "Is that a true story?"

"It could be." I said.

One of the other boys chimed in, "It's realistic fiction."

It remains realistic fiction that we could do something to halt unchecked gun violence in this country. We haven't done it. Maybe we are waiting for bulletproof vests from heaven.

But what if our thoughts and prayers became action? What if we did the work of God in the world? What if we offered our prayers and, hearing the voice of God in response, became God's hands?

Is that a true story, he asked. Not yet, but it could be.