Yesterday, I did something that was both out of character for me and out of my comfort zone – I attended the Northeast Ohio Gun Show at the Cuyahoga County Fairgrounds in Berea. I had a good reason to go – I was doing “sermon research,” but that’s not what I told the men behind the row upon row upon row of pistols, rifles, revolvers, handguns, semi-automatic, AK-47’s and other guns that I only recognized from TV shows. I told them that I wanted to buy a firearm for personal protection. No one asked me of course, what I was protecting myself from – that wasn’t why they were there. They were there to be helpful to me – a single woman in a sea of men – to buy the gun that worked best for me. My real reason for going was to see for myself just how easy it would be for me to buy a gun – without a background check.

I spoke with dealer after dealer, discussing the various merits of a double action revolver verses a semi-automatic pistol. When I asked, so if I decide to buy the gun today, what do I need to do? All the dealers did exactly the same thing – they gave me a form to fill out and they would do a background check on me right then and there. I was encouraged to note that my assumptions about being able to waltz into a gun show and buy a gun without a check were wrong. My last stop, however, was at a guy who sold rifles. I chatted with him for a while and then asked him what I would need to do if I wanted to buy a rifle for my husband. He leaned over conspiratorialy. “Nothing, he said.” “I’m not a dealer – I’m a private owner and collector of guns. If you want one – two – whatever, I’ll sell it to you. It’s legal for you to give them to whoever you want – as long as they’re not a felon.” “What about background check?” I asked? “Don’t I need to bring him in?” “Nah,” he said, “private owner, I can sell who ever I want. It’s still a free country, ain’t it?” He smiled, winked, I thanked him and left. Without buying a gun.

Both attending the gun show and taking on this sermon is out of my comfort zone. I tend to gravitate towards sermons that are more spiritual and less political; more inward focused than outwardly focused. However, I wanted to talk this morning about this very difficult, complex and emotionally challenging subject because – I’m also becoming increasingly alarmed.

I’m alarmed when I pick up the Cleveland Plain Dealer and find a story about another human being shot or killed in the City of Cleveland by a firearm. Not a paper goes by without someone being killed or injured because of gun violence.

I’m concerned about certain alarming statistics that we don’t often pause to think about – 31,000 gun deaths a year in the United States; that every 30 minutes a child dies by gun violence; that 10 women a week die from domestic violence from a firearm.

I’m freaked out by the places we know of because of the massacres that happened there - Columbine, or Sandy Hook, or Aurora or Chardon.

And finally, I fear that I’m becoming jaded by what now is becoming routine – someone who is upset or mentally ill has easy access to a gun and goes on a rampage. The media swoops in – they interview family and friends – “never in a million years would I imagine him doing this...” they say, “quiet guy...nice to his neighbors...a regular teen-age boy...” a memorial is set up with candles and stuffed animals – candle light vigils are held and then – things return to “normal” until the next violent shooting erupts. Is this the new normal then? Is gun violence something that we are just supposed to get used to? Shrug our shoulders and stand idly by while our neighbors, friends, fellow human beings are slaughtered?

So, before I go much farther, I want to begin by stating some assumptions I am making and then tell you what this sermon is NOT. First, I’m assuming that some of you here are legal gun owners. Some of you may be members of the NRA. Some of you have family in law enforcement or in the military. I’m assuming that some of you here use your guns for either target
practice or hunting. I’m assuming that there are a variety of opinions, beliefs, feelings and experiences about gun violence reduction and the best means to go about reducing it. I’m also assuming that there are some of here who have been directly affected by gun violence. You may have been shot yourself, or threatened. You may have a close relative or friend who was shot or even killed by a gun. I’m assuming that some of you in this room have thought about suicide and that some of you may have thought about using a gun to end your life. And finally, I’m assuming that some of you have had little to do with guns – maybe nothing – never having loaded, held or fired one nor would you want to. All of these experiences are in this room, which represent the diversity and struggle of knowing how to reduce gun violence in our community – in our state – and in our country.

So now let me tell you what this sermon is NOT. This is not a sermon that is advocating getting rid of all guns or will encourage changing the 2nd Amendment. What I want to look at is not so much the effect of gun violence on our society and on real human beings – but the cause – what are some of the factors that suggest the only way to deal with our feelings of fear or rage or despair or helplessness is to get a gun? And are there tangible ways that ordinary citizens can pressure not the lawmakers, but gun manufacturers to help reduce gun violence, using not moral arguments but ones that they might listen to – the power of capitalism, the market and the media?

First of all, we have to ask ourselves, is gun violence in this country really so bad – or it simply the impression we because of the media adage “if it bleeds, it leads?”

Are there really that many gun-related deaths or do we just hear them more because of our 24 hour news cycle and because gun deaths give the news the dramatic feel of a crime show.

There are 31,000 deaths a year and 90,000 injuries reported in the United States today. Gun violence is the #1 cause of death of African American youth.

61% of gun-related deaths were by suicide...61%.

Here in Cuyahoga County, the County Coroner reports that from 2009-2011, there were 436 gun deaths in this county alone; 56% of those were homicides, 42% suicides, .5% accidental and 1% undetermined.

It doesn’t take much digging to find out that yes, the United States has a huge addiction to its guns. The United States has 88 guns per 100 people and 10 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people, which is more than 27 other developed countries. Next below the United States is Switzerland, with 45.7 guns per 100 people.

Owing, having, using guns legally isn’t the problem though, is it?

In fact, the good news is that overall the rate of firearm homicide deaths has declined since it hit a high in 1993. While homicides have declined in the United States, mass shootings have increased and with it, the number of innocent lives. So what do all these statistics tell us? That while gun ownership and use for all purposes is declining in the United States, the negative consequences of easy access to guns has become more concentrated. Who suffers the most from easy access to guns? – young people, especially those in communities of color, working class and poor people, small business owners, the families of the mentally ill, and the families of victims of mass shootings.

What’s behind the impulse to own a firearm? The healthy reasons aren’t hard to understand – family tradition, love of hunting, sport, but I haven’t fessed up to my own reason why I have considered purchasing a handgun. I haven’t done it yet, mainly because Wayne has been pretty clear that he does not wan a firearm in our home. The reason I have thought about buying a handgun is fear. Let’s look at that impulse for a moment.

Fear is an important reason many people decide to own a gun. As a woman, not a day goes by when I don’t think about my own personal safety and am constantly on the alert for a life-threatening situation. I imagine scenarios of being accosted by another human being and, if necessary, would take their life before they take mine. It seems laughable when I consider that my own daily routines do not usually put me in any high crime area. Yet, I read a story in the news of a suburban home invasion where people were robbed, molested or killed and I think to myself that I’d like to have that gun

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by my bedside, just in case. I seem to ignore the equally compelling statistics that often those guns are used against the homeowners, who are often not well trained or have not kept their skills up to date. I also seem to ignore the fact that I heard quoted by a police officer, that most of the break-ins actually occur during the day and that the robbers are looking for three things; money, jewelry and guns – which they can sell on the black market.

Fear is not only a factor for a white woman living in the suburbs of Bay Village – but it’s a legitimate fear for a young black man living in East Cleveland or Cleveland Heights, where the reporting of gun-related deaths and firearm injuries are the highest. The fear of being attacked, mugged or shot is real. When we study the realities of racism, of white flight from the inner cities, of the way public schools are not funded and social programs meant to help lift people out of poverty are ineffective, what’s left? A permanent underclass of people, particularly young black and brown men, who are not asked what do you want to be when you grow up – a doctor, lawyer, farmer, teacher – but would you prefer to go to school, prison or be dead?

If you’re in that permanent underclass, it’s likely that your child doesn’t get to go to quality day care or pre-school, or have a stable home. Your parents and grandparents likely did not have stable employment, housing or transportation; your child that becomes a man with an inadequate education, no likelihood for meaningful employment, and – then – add on the daily insults of racism = what have you got waiting for you?

I’ll tell you what you get waiting for you – the Industrial Prison Complex, Mass Incarceration and the creation, as Michelle Alexander cites in her book, The New Jim Crow, the institutional underpinning for the permanent underclass of young black men and the families, along with the women and men who love them. I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that a mass gathering to protest this reality will be happening in Public Square downtown Cleveland on Wednesday, October 22 at 3 PM p.m, supported by a group called “Puncture the Silence.” I spoke about Michelle Alexander’s book in a sermon last May, and it won’t surprise you, my eloquent sermon did not solve the problem of mass incarceration of young black men!! So attend the rally – or if you can’t, join with Inclusivity Ministry members in reading and discussing Michelle Alexander’s book, The New Jim Crow, this winter

Because of our nation’s inability to deal with the ever-widening income gap, the legacy of racism and the lack of opportunities for working class and working poor women and men, our society continues to create and sustain places where the only effective rule is not the rule of law, but the law of the streets – of every person for him or herself. These neighborhoods, increasingly isolated from access to money, power or resources, become further isolated from the rest of the city and the suburbs and a kind of frontier justice rules the day.

This is not to imply that behind every gun is a young, black man, because of course, gun violence is committed by all kinds of people. United States children of all races have 9 times the rate of accidental gun injuries than other developed countries. In this country, every 30 minutes, a child or a teenager is injured or killed by gun violence. United States youth of all races have 20 times the gun homicide rate than of other countries. We lead the industrialized world in per capita child gun death – all of which is preventable with appropriate storage and safer gun technology. Slide of me holding a gun as a child, circa 1966. 1 in 3 US homes with children have a gun, and of those, 43% have an unlocked gun (JAMA) In homes with guns and kids under 10 yr, 73% of the kids know the location of the gun and 36% have touched it. The slide behind me is, thankfully a toy gun since my parents did not own a firearm in the home, but it’s a sobering reminder of how many children die because of easy access to firearms. Blank Slide.

Behind every gun used in a crime or a suicide is a story – and a thought – that led to an action with terrible consequences. Behind every Columbine, or Virginia Tech or Aurora, Colorado or Newtown there is a tragic decision made by a person that was so isolated from his fellow human beings – so blinded by his own sense of self-justification or need to make a statement – that he felt the only way was to take out as many people as possible.

We wonder if any of these terrible events could have been prevented by a better funded and comprehensive mental health system.

We wonder if, as a nation, we funded mental health to the same degree as we fund cancer research if it would make a difference.
We wonder why we isolate those with mental illnesses and abandon them to the streets because there are few well-funded institutions for the mentally ill.

In the case of Adam Lanza of Newtown, it seemed clear that his parents tried everything they could to get help for their son. They were not absent parents; they had money and support; therapists and mental health professionals but still could not anticipate their son’s decision to end so many innocent lives. There was one thing his mother could have done, however. She could have made it impossible for him to get a gun. There’s one thing that we, as a country can do – and that is make it impossible for someone like an Adam Lanza to have access to firearms, even if it was his mother’s gun, in her own home, for self protection.

That’s why I’m so very hopeful about the strategy taken up by Greater Cleveland Congregations, our community faith based organizing partner that has targeted gun violence as one of its major priorities. Their strategy is not to lobby legislators to change existing gun laws, because they know the power and money of the National Rifle Association is a pretty formidable force. Instead, what they are trying to do is to encourage gun manufacturers to use their influence to help stop the flow of guns to criminals. They also want them to aggressively market the new technologies already developed that personalizes guns so that only the authorized user can fire them. Finally, they are asking manufacturers to step up their own and their dealers cooperation more with law enforcement to trace firearms used in crimes. Since U.S. government agencies at every level, from municipalities to the Department of Defence buy almost half the guns in this country, Greater Cleveland Congregations is asking local government and law enforcement leaders to join together to pressure manufacturers into making these changes. Rev. Wayne has a meeting on Wednesday morning with the mayor of Rocky River to ask her if she will sign on to a simple request for information from gun manufacturers. GCC is simply saying that there are people who want safer, smarter guns, and we should have the opportunity to purchase guns like that in the American marketplace.  

One version of these Smart Guns, contain an electronic chip in the gun which communicates with a watch that the user wears in order for the gun to operate. The gun cannot be fired without the watch.

It sounds like a great strategy to me, except for one thing – Andy Raymond, a gun shop owner of Rockville, Maryland who agreed to make what’s called SMART guns available to the public, was forced to remove the product from his store after receiving death threats from angry gun-rights activists. Raymond, who said he’s on the right-wing vanguard of the gun rights community believes that this new technology should be available to those who want it. He said he’s vehemently opposed to gun rights activists arguing against the idea of a smart gun – or any gun. “It’s so hypocritical,” Raymond writes. “That’s the antithesis of everything that we pro-gun, pro-Second Amendment people should be. You are not supposed to say a gun should be prohibited. Then you are being no different from the anti-gun people who say an AR-15 should be prohibited.”

That’s where I differ with Raymond because I’m really not sure that the average gun enthusiast needs to have an AR-15 or an AK-47 for hunting or target practice, but that’s a personal opinion and not a strategy or saving lives. What I do know is that none of us – Americans from any and all walks of life – whether living in a relatively safe suburb or in the middle of a crime ridden neighborhood – none of us can afford to stand idly by any longer. As we heard from this morning’s reading – reducing gun violence through whatever means we can find is not a choice – it’s a moral imperative. The marketplace approach advocated by GCC is a long road to take, but there are many other activist groups using other strategies. This is ours. After today’s service, visit the table in the Rotunda and talk to our own members involved with Greater Cleveland Congregations.

We’ve got to bite this bullet and taken on those voices that would prevent the sale of Smart Guns. The phrase, “bite the bullet” was first coined during the Civil War, when soldiers were given a bullet to bite before enduring surgery without anesthesia. There is no anesthesia to help diminish the pain of the reality of gun violence in our communities, and there will be no solution to gun violence without the pain of difficult

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2 Greater Cleveland Congregations/ Plain Dealer News from Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2014.

choices and compromises that gun owners, state and local budget budget-builders, mental health advocates, and legislators are going to have to make.

- We have to bite the bullet and insist that Smart Guns become readily accessible at every gunstore and gun show that wants them.

- We have to bite the bullet and deal with the fact that despite our best legislative efforts lawfully purchased guns can easily be obtained by criminals through unregulated private market sales.

- We have to bite the bullet and insist on the modest intensifying of background checks that was almost passed after the Newtown shootings.

- We have to bite the bullet and stop being bullied by those whose only argument is “I want my 2nd amendment rights” without proposing any responsible solutions for reducing gun violence.

- We have to bite the bullet and deal with our own pain, or rage, or frustration and insist on becoming experts at non-violent communication.

Because if we don’t bite this bullet now – it’s going to bite us – ALL of us in places that hurt us the most – in the lives of our family members, friends; in the quality of life that we enjoy and the kind of world we want to live in – and who knows, by doing this work – we may be about the business of saving some lives – even, your own. May it be so.