

When Antoinette Tuff saw a gunman as a human being

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

August 22, 2013

As I read the headline yesterday, my heart began to pound and my throat closed up: "[School Clerk In Georgia Persuaded Gunman To Lay Down Weapons.](#)" This was a good story—ultimately a hopeful one—but all I could see was “school” and “gunman.”

In the eight months since the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, I have preached a number of times about violence in this country. I did this after Newtown, after Hadiya Pendleton, after the assault weapons ban failed to pass, after the Supreme Court struck down parts of the Voting Rights Act (which sought to remediate violence historically done to would-be voters), after the George Zimmerman verdict. I feel like a broken record. I am exhausted by a year of lament.

I live in as safe a town as any, not in Egypt, Syria or Afghanistan. But one need not reside in a war-torn nation to feel the effects of violence. Study after study reveals how the brains and biochemistry of people, especially children, are affected by the associated stresses of violence, even by the noise of repeated gunfire.

So often this year I’ve preached lament, Christ at the cross as we mourn. But this story from Georgia is about not tragedy but tragedy averted—through a woman named Antoinette Tuff and her remarkable wisdom, empathy and courage. In this story, I hear the good news proclaimed. We will know peace through the work of empathy, healing through compassion. We will see an end to violence when we offer another way.

Michael Brandon Hill walked into the office of a large elementary school on Tuesday, armed to the teeth. He told Tuff—a school clerk—that he had no reason to live and was going to die that day.

Tuff saw Hill as a hurting young man, and she responded by engaging him in conversation. She reassured him that there was a way out, that he hadn’t killed or

hurt anyone yet. She gave him hope—by sharing a story of the hardships she'd known, by reassuring him that he was not alone and that even the darkest days can pass.

Because of that living hope, the power of fear, violence and death was thwarted. Tuff asked Hill to put his weapons down, and he did.

I sometimes argue with a family member, a would-be armed teacher in Texas, who claims the best way to prevent school shootings is to put guns in schools. I certainly appreciate the importance of making schools safe; I'm the mother, wife, daughter, sister and sister-in-law of people who spend their days in public schools. But I'm also a preacher, and I firmly believe this: arming ourselves doesn't make us safer, and it isn't what Jesus calls his followers to do.

Jesus says we should turn the other cheek, that peacemakers are blessed. And he says that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Jesus calls us to a life of risk-taking and vulnerability, of sharing ourselves and letting down our defenses, so that healing may occur. The Christian tradition witnesses to the power of grace—the opportunity to make things right once more—in an individual life and in the world.

Our culture puts a lot of stock in building up our defenses and demonizing others. Whether we're naming those who would perpetrate violence as "Islamic terrorists," "thugs" or the "mentally ill," we've gotten dangerously good at separating ourselves from others—and in so doing, at assuring our world of mutual destruction.

Antoinette Tuff chose a different path. She saw herself in the troubled young man who came into the school; she saw her son; she saw someone who was hurting. "I just kept trying to talk him down," she said, "and let him know I knew how he was feeling."

I hope Tuff's story gets preached a lot this week. I hope people see the Gospel alive in her: a reminder that love is stronger than death, that Christ goes to the cross and is raised, that we have better tools at our disposal than guns. I hope the tears that fill our eyes are tears not of lament but of thanksgiving, relief and joy.

I am full of hope this week, and that'll preach.