

Why would anyone go to church now?

We need a place where we can talk about why mass shootings happen.

By [Martha Spong](#)

November 7, 2017

“Why would anyone go to church now?”

Our son wondered this, watching the news about the church shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas. He has reached the age where he hears about the news at school, so we have become more open to having him hear and see things on TV, rather than trying to shield him from the hard things that happen. We need to be able to answer his questions ourselves. I don't know if you have heard the common talk of seventh grade boys lately, but it definitely requires some counterinfluences.

“Why would anyone go to church now?” he asked us again. “The doors are unlocked! Anyone could come in.”

It's true that in church we are a special flock of sitting ducks, focused in one direction, both physically and spiritually. I rarely look around in church, when I am sitting in the pews, other than when we pass the peace. I estimate how large a crowd is behind me by the sounds they make. I'm trying not to seem overly interested in who is late, or whose children are making noise; I'm trying to be a good pastor's wife.

Up front, as the pastor and preacher, it's different. I'm counting heads, noting who is missing. But even then, I am not worrying about disaster, or I haven't been, even though I know my wife, Kathryn, has a plan in case someone dangerous comes into the sanctuary.

Experts offering their two cents worth on cable news recommended that churches review their emergency plans and look into security systems of staffing appropriate

to their size and situation. Maybe, they suggested, someone in the congregation is already wearing a weapon to worship.

I know this is true in some of my colleague's congregations.

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It's not clear yet what the shooter's relationship to religion was. His social media accounts were quickly archived, but not so fast that some bad actors didn't have a chance to create alternative "likes" and loyalties for him. What does seem to be clear is that a man with a history of domestic violence threatened his mother-in-law, and then he shot up the church she attended. This morning the president suggested that had a neighbor not fired at the shooter, there might have been hundreds of deaths. A better guess is had he not been given chase, his next stop would have been his mother-in-law's house.

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We did our best to reassure our son, pointing out that the shooter did not choose a church at random. I'm not sure how comforting that is, really. How was a guy who cracked his infant stepson's skull out on the street to do this? He choked his wife; he punched his dog. Why don't we take these clusters of behavior seriously? We don't because we undervalue harm done to women and children, and we overvalue white men and their chance of a future. This is magnified when we add race, sexual orientation, gender identity to the victim side of the equation.

The permission given to this man to keep assaulting other people, the pattern of abuse he inflicted on others before Sunday, the ready availability of a weapon that can kill, terribly, so many people, so quickly—all these factors remain for other abusers, other men who cannot manage their anger or their disappointment or their frustration, who cannot resist the temptation of power and have the means available to deal out death.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:15)

It might not be fair for me to make suggestions about what churches should do about their security when I am not serving one right now. Our own history as people of faith is problematic. Joshua and his house pledged to serve the Lord, but in the Promised Land, they used all their available weapons and powers to kill the people they saw as enemies, and to gain the land they wanted. They saw being the chosen ones as permission to deal out death. We should not be surprised that righteousness and power have been confused and conflated throughout human history.

Why would anyone go to church now? Our son doesn't drop his questions until he gets a satisfying answer, and he usually asks them again, just to be sure. We will go because it's what we do, just like we ride on a bike path, or go to the movies, or attend a concert. We will go because most of us cannot maintain the kind of hypervigilance required to be on watch at all times. We will go because we want to be with the people we know and love. We will go for solace, and solidarity.

That is not enough.

I'm not saying this is easy. In the United States, we worship our guns like no other nation in the world, and some will say more guns are the answer. I do not believe this. We need to be direct in saying the god of guns is a false god. As much as I believe Jesus is among the grieving, I believe he is also pressing on his church to engage with the powers and principalities and say "No more!" Our culture privileges the powerful; often our church culture does the same. Yet we know Jesus proclaimed a preferential option for people who are marginalized and oppressed. We need the church to be a place where we talk about why mass shootings happen. We need to have those conversations and let God be part of them. We need to decide whether the church will be not just a voice speaking but a body acting to bring change in human priorities and understanding. If we have any power left as an institution, we must work together for good, in Jesus's name.

I could stay screened here across the street, watching for unfamiliar vehicles and people, but I want more than the safe view from my window.

As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

Originally posted at [Spong's blog](#)