

Opinion



Canned goods are seen on a shelf in this 2013 photo of a food pantry run by the Helping Hand Outreach Program in the basement of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Washington. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Christian Mocek

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When 20-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, I was sitting in my college dorm room studying for an exam. This really means I was scrolling through Twitter enjoying my friends' 140-character complaints about finals week.

A tweet showed up in my feed shortly after the shooting happened. I don't remember exactly what it said or what news organization it came from. It read something like, "Shooting at Connecticut school, more details to come."

I watched my Twitter feed as more facts started to emerge. Eventually, CNN broke into their scheduled broadcast with coverage of the shooting. At some point, I moved from my desk chair to my futon to watch the TV. Tears were rolling down my face. I watched, prayed and, later in the day, found some close friends to pray with some more.

When 26-year-old Devin Patrick Kelly killed 26 people and wounded 20 others at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, just under two weeks ago, I was on a work trip in Phoenix, Arizona. I turned on the TV in my hotel room and saw coverage of the shooting.

I let out a big sigh, turned off the TV, and then went to exercise. There was no crying on the couch or calling my close friends. After the shooting in Newtown, I cried as I watched President Barack Obama wipe away his own tears on live television. I still haven't watched or read President Donald Trump's statement on the shooting in Texas.

As many are, I'm tired. I'm tired of turning on the news to see that another African-American boy was shot and killed on the streets of Louisville, Kentucky, where I live. I'm tired of another mass shooting, another terrorist attack, another soldier killed in conflict overseas.

I'm also upset that the needle hasn't moved on gun control legislation. Similar high-powered semi-automatic weapons were used to kill innocent people in Sutherland Springs on November 5, in Las Vegas on October 1, in San Bernardino in 2015, and in Newtown in 2012, among many other incidents over the past five years. It is heartbreaking to me that Republicans in Congress appear unwilling to do anything about it.

"Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more" (Luke 12:48). I sure hope when these uncompromising Second Amendment purists stand at the gates of Heaven and face their reckoning, they won't stumble over their words when bloodstained church pews are placed before them and Jesus asks, "How could you let this happen in my house to my children?"

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But this essay isn't about how I'm tired of the violence or how our nation desperately needs to discuss reasonable restrictions on the purchase of guns.

It's an essay about how I'm sorry that I walked away.

Before my wife and I welcomed our son into the world, we helped out at a homeless mission each week. Our work was mostly the ordinary humdrum of serving dinner, organizing clothes and engaging in awkward conversations with the mission's clients.

While there, we developed relationships with a few clients we saw each week. There was Michael who liked to tell stories about computers, the stars, and the National Security Agency.

There was Dave, a former CPA who because of his struggles with alcohol had lost his home. I met him when he was living in subsidized housing and somewhat back on track. He was still drinking but had secured a job and stopped coming to the mission. I still think about and pray for him often.

And then there was Juan, who was a small-statured and incredibly friendly man who had spent more time living on the streets than I'd been alive. His eyes were caved in and bloodshot, a symptom of a decades-long relationship with the bottle. Juan and I talked about Jesus often when we were together — about his love, his grace and his command to love others. Juan was a faithful man in the ways he could be and had an infectious hope about him that I admired.

Juan would tell my wife and me that, "God sent you here." He would also look at my wife and say, "You're an angel." So much of homeless ministry is simply showing up with open hands and an open heart.

After acts of violence such as the Texas shooting or the Newtown shooting, it is easy to seclude ourselves into the safe enclaves of what we know and understand. It is easy to remove ourselves from the pain of the victims' families and from the responsibility to do something to ensure something like this doesn't happen again.

After the Texas shooting, and truthfully after many incidents of mass violence before this, I did exactly that. I succumbed to the thinking that, in words reflecting the sermons of John Wesley, "Doing all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can," makes no difference at all because it is just wiped away by the violence of men. Of course that's not true. The lives of the saints before me tell me as much.

Henri Nouwen [told a group of scared and tired religious leaders](#) after the 1992 Los Angeles riots that, "Our first responsibility in the face of violence is to prevent it from destroying us."

For me, that means I can't stop showing up, even when I want to walk away. This winter I've made plans to help at a homeless shelter again. It's my way of trying to do all the good I can in the ways that I can. It's also my atonement for those times I walk away and think that nothing is making a difference.

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