On a number of occasions—far too many occasions—you’ve heard me speak of my weariness in preaching about mass shootings. That’s understandable. In the past 15 years, there were 77 mass shootings in America. Since August 1, 1966, there have been 163.

In hindsight and after serious thought and prayer, my decision to avoid the topic—at least from the pulpit—was a disservice—to you, to those who died, and to the countless unknown people who in future years will experience tragedies like that in Virginia Beach on Friday. My silence hasn’t done anything to help.

Lest anyone be concerned that my words support a specific political agenda, don’t worry. Exacerbating the existing polarization on this issue isn’t my point and it wouldn’t be productive.

As one analyst wrote, “Whether [the] shootings take place in Parkland or Las Vegas, Newtown or Fort Hood, the effect on our public discourse is the same. Those on the left call for more gun control. Those on the right talk about mental health and better enforcement of the laws already on the books.” The reality is that our country hasn’t taken action from either or both directions.

However, the fear that mass shootings evoke is real and it exists in Ardmore and at St. Philip’s. So I’d like to share some statistics that might help alleviate the reasonable anxieties people have, and also talk about the potential Christian responses to an increasingly frequent problem.

According to the Washington Post, citing data from the Gun Violence Archive, “There is no universally accepted definition of a public mass shooting.” The article, published in today’s paper, “defines it narrowly. It looks at the 163 shootings in which four or more people were killed by a lone shooter (two shooters in a few cases). It does not include shootings tied to gang disputes or robberies that
went awry, and it does not include domestic shootings that took place exclusively in private homes. A broader definition would yield much higher numbers.”

The tally begins Aug. 1, 1966, when a sniper at the University of Texas in Austin killed 18 people and injured another 30.

There is at least one church in Ardmore that now locks its doors during worship and has hired armed guards. People here have suggested we do the same. These are, I believe, emotional responses prompted by fear.

The fear is understandable, but there’s a much greater likelihood that any of us might be killed at a mass shooting when visiting a bar, a mall, a concert, or a government building. Of the 163 incidents cited, 10 occurred in places of worship and 21 in schools. The only safer place—if that’s the right word—is a military base, where there have been three. If we had armed guards at church, there’s probably a greater risk that an unarmed person who might look dangerous could be shot by someone feeling threatened.

I don’t know how we will prevent future acts of violence like that on Friday, but we must not accept them as an unavoidable and unfortunate parts of life. The meaningless “moments of silence” that our politicians observe don’t help the victims, their families, or anyone else.

And they don’t excuse our inability—or is it unwillingness—to find a solution. In a democracy, the people and their government are inseparable. The failure of our leaders is our failure. We find ways to solve other problems. Why not this one?

At the Ascension, which we celebrate today, Christ said good-bye to his disciples. He also charged them to continue his ministry of peace and reconciliation. As Christians, that’s our ministry, too.
Reconciliation begins with a desire to turn in a new direction and to experience change of heart. For divisive issues, it also requires compromise. To those who argue for strict gun control, what would you give up that might prevent another mass shooting. To anyone who advocates for unlimited gun rights, I’d say the same.

We are the only country in the world with this problem. Laws are, for the most part, designed to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We must look for leaders who truly want to solve the many problems this country faces, but especially mass shootings. Politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, who posture and pander to their bases, will never compromise. We must become a thoughtful and informed electorate. Seeing where candidates get their funding will tell us a lot about their probable voting record.

The argument on either side that giving an inch leads to giving a mile isn’t realistic, and my apology to anyone who feels that way. We have laws to protect people when risk is involved, whether on the road, in the workplace, or at home. We require a license and test to drive a car, and the government hasn’t taken away our cars. Maybe we can reframe the issue in a new way. Instead of “gun rights” and “gun control,” let’s talk about “gun sanity.”

Jon Stewart, speaking on the Daily Show years ago, put this in his unique perspective. After Sam Brownback, then governor of Kansas, after claiming that Kansas gun-owners had proven that they were responsible and did not need any training, signed into law a bill eliminating the eight-hour training requirement for a gun license.

Stewart observed, “The state that believes 8 hours of gun training is too much for its gun owners requires 1,000 hours of training for its professional
estheticians,” He added, “I tell you why: you can never be too careful with hot wax and body hair.”

Let’s have a change of heart, put aside our divisions, and find a way to solve this tragic and unnecessary problem. Protecting all God’s people is, should be, and always will be, one of the highest Christian priorities.

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i https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/presidents-and-mass-shootings

ii Source: Gun Violence Archive. Excludes the roughly 22,000 annual gun suicides, which are not publicly reported in real time.