



## Rachel's Weeping

I find myself still sighing deeply over the massacre of innocents at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

Societally, we have gone through a collective emotional concussion, disorienting and nauseating, which are the two symptoms I remember from my concussion as a kid getting beamed on the cheek by a Little League fastball. I actually hope we don't recover quickly. I hope we remain disoriented and nauseated for a good while longer, because regaining equilibrium too quickly will only serve the status quo.

The pattern is familiar. The public clamors for well-meaning discussions around gun violence, but as the horror fades, life and other issues inevitably crowd in. We may not mean to, but we move on. The discussion is then ceded to those holding unyielding abstractions, talking past each other citing competing studies and shibboleths. Intractability sets in. Nothing changes. And the litany of our young dying in mass shootings builds: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, Sandy Hook.

After the birth of Jesus, Herod ordered the slaughter of all boys under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem in a flailing attempt to eliminate this newborn threat to the title King of the Jews. Jesus was the intended target of a massacre of children. Matthew 2:18 quotes the prophet Jeremiah to capture the region's grief: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (NIV).

In my own concussive cobwebs I hear Rachel's mourning from two directions within our Covenant family. First there is mourning from Newtown and every place like Newtown. While we have no Covenant churches precisely there, Connecticut is a small state with plenty of Covenant connections to the community. It is where Pastor Doug Bixby grew up. He wrote me, "It is simply one of the darkest days in the history of this town." Six-year-old victim Ana Marquez-Greene is the daughter of a high-school friend to another Covenant pastor, Matt Lundgren. Covenanters Jack and Becca Dowling were on site as rapid response chaplains, counseling families

and first responders. Similar stories multiply.

The grief is palpable to many others because we have churches in many other communities like Newtown. The faces, names, and personal stories of the children and staff could be transposed directly to the neighborhood school of a goodly number of Covenanters in any number of states and provinces. The victims are recognizable, even if they are not known. Newtown becomes Mytown. With this commonality, the sentiment "It could never happen here" sorrowfully concedes, "Well, maybe it could."

But, interestingly, that very grieving is helping more and more people hear the mournful strains of Rachel coming from a second direction. The loss of children and youth to gun violence is an ever-present pain for many urban Covenant churches and ethnic communities, from crowded New York City to sparsely populated Alaskan villages on the Bering Sea. Pain shared is life shared. The pain of Sandy Hook is awakening people to the truth that many in our urban communities and ethnic populations live with this anguish continually.

In the aftermath of Newtown, I sent an email to a sampling of churches who are determined to bring the hope of Christ to high-risk areas. I asked if any children and youth from the congregation had ever been wounded or killed in gun violence. Here is just a fraction of the responses. These are not statistics. These are Covenanters. These are your children and youth.

- Gregory, a pastor's great-grandson, age fourteen, killed by a stray bullet on his way home from a basketball game.
- Bolivia, age twenty, murdered in front of eleven adolescents on the sidewalk of the church.
- Tamika, age four, shot in the head by gang crossfire. She survived but will be mentally disabled for life.
- T.J. killed randomly while riding home on a bus.
- John, seventeen, murdered just before a scheduled meeting with the pastor to turn his life around.

There is common ground at the cross  
—and there is common ground at the graves of our children.

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## COMPASS BEARINGS

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- Marvin, a pastor's son, killed on the sidewalk.

I can't tell you how proud I am of congregations like these that run to the need, not from it. These sisters and brothers are uncommonly courageous, wise, caring, persistent, and prophetic.

The pain of Rachel knows no geographic, socio-economic, or ethnic boundaries. There is common ground at the cross—and there is common ground at the grave of our children. This one time, can common ground lead to common sense in balancing rights with responsibilities? Indeed, don't all rights come with responsibilities? We all know that the right to free speech ends at yelling "fire" in a crowded theater. My church's right to the free exercise of religion still came with a \$250,000 price tag for mandated fire sprinklers and other building code requirements. Now is the time to find common sense approaches for the common good in curbing gun violence, if only for our children. And for the Rachels who mourn. ■