John Pavlovitz, GGS Forum 10-13-25

Good evening. It is an honor to share this space and time with all of you, although I confess I'm not sure how to feel about it all.

I am internally conflicted. On one hand, I am profoundly grateful that you have chosen to be present tonight and to have physical proximity with like-hearted people, in an effort to try and be the peacemakers in a war-torn place. It's heartening to see so many people who center empathy in days when cruelty is trending.

And yet, I carry the regret that we even need to be here at all; that so many grandparents have found it necessary to marshal their collective power to confront a largely preventable national ill during these invaluable years of their lives.

I grieve that so many of you, as spiritual leaders, as clergy, as people of faith, are having to divert your attention from the myriad of needs in your orbit, to attempt to undo damage that, in great part, has been done by other professed religious people that you share this place with.

And I lament that the place we call home is so afflicted with routine bloodshed that we need to launch organizations and forge partnerships and create events and expend so much energy, essentially to figure out how to save us from ourselves; to know that one of the most urgent, persistent, and deadly threats here is an inside job.

And so, while I feel gratitude for the fact that you are here, and hope we can find encouragement by being here, and that ideas birthed here will begin to transform communities, we can acknowledge that we shouldn't be here.

In fact, if we called almost any other developed nation home, we wouldn't be. What we are experiencing is a nearly planetary aberration that runs counter to the very heart of all of our faith traditions and moral codes, one that is fully antithetical to Jesus' call to love our neighbor, one that flies in the face of what religion at its best seeks to offer the world.

But since we are here, and knowing how abnormal this all is, we begin by asking the question, "How did we end up here?" How has this nation become an environment where mass shootings are now ubiquitous, where the frequency and severity of such brutality are so commonplace that we normalize them, a place where we are often not afforded the space to properly grieve the loss of life in one place before our attention is pulled to another? And why are so many people who claim faith, resistant to any efforts to make us safer, beyond performative mourning and thoughts and prayers platitudes?

I served for over two decades as a pastor in the local church. The past decade or so of my journey has been spent ministering to a sprawling, disparate virtual congregation made up of people all over this country. In my travels now, both in person and online, I do some speaking, of course, but I do a lot of listening, too. I hear or read hundreds of stories each month, and at this point I don't consider myself primarily an author or a blogger or even a pastor—but a collector of stories: a war correspondent. I travel to a new town or show up in a different community or reach people online where they are, and I enter the trenches of life with them, and I say, "Tell me what's happening here on the ground so I can tell the folks back home." And this gives me a front row seat to their varied experience of being human.

People give me proximity to their pain, they show me their grief, they share with me their struggles, and they reveal their dreams to me. I bear witness to the words people speak, I listen for the places their voices shake, I sit with them in their anger, and I leave my time with them, asking myself: What are they trying to say that they cannot quite verbalize? What do they wish people around them could hear if their voices could carry? How can I connect their humanity to the humanity that does not share

their geographic or relational space—and that's the place I write and speak from. I do my best to be a translator of diverse experience and try to find the patterns in those disparate narratives.

So, Kansas City, what's happening here on the ground?

As I consider how we got here, I believe we are experiencing the putrid fruit of what fear does to the human heart, both individually and collectively, the contempt it breeds, the tribalism it yields, the aggression it fosters.

Often, when I meet people in my travels on speaking tours, we don't necessarily have a lot of time together. They might come up before or after a talk, tell me something deeply personal, and in a quick moment, and without knowing any of their backstory—they're hoping I can give them something that they can take home with them to help them.

Here's what I tell them: Look for the fears and the false stories: find out what people are afraid of and figure out why those fears might be misplaced or addressed—because no one is at their best when they're terrified. When we're in conflict with other people, whether we're debating politics or religions, finances or work problems, parenting issues or strong opinions on any topic, the other person is almost always afraid of something—and that fear drives them (and us) to hold or defend a certain position:

Tens of millions of Americans filling our houses of worship have been shaped over time by a belief system (both theologically and politically driven) that runs primarily on fear, one that requires enemies and adversaries to exist, one that needs encroaching threats that they must be protected from. The unhealthy orientation of so many toward guns is the emotional net result of being weaned for decades on a steady diet of culture war rhetoric, targeted disinformation, racial stereotypes, incendiary sermons, and plain ol' white supremacy.

And the net result of these false stories of constant imminent danger is that millions of people who express faith in a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving, feel so assailed by those they share communities with, they feel they need to take matters into their own hands because they no longer trust in that God to protect them. Their God has become a gun.

Though their tradition places the highest value on loving one's neighbor, they have come to dehumanize and vilify their neighbors to the point that violence feels acceptable, even righteous. And whether we are in such spiritual communities, or we simply interact with people in those communities within our families, at our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, and on social media, we are going to need to help dispel those false fear stories, and rehumanize those their fictional fear narratives have targeted, knowing that no one is at their best when they are terrified.

And though tonight we are speaking about the issue of gun violence through the lens of faith from the widest perspective, from all traditions and denominations, as a former Christian pastor I believe we need to name the reality that the white Evangelical Church in America has been particularly complicit in creating a posturing, aggressive *God and Guns* culture in this country that has fashioned a false idol out of weapons of mass carnage; with political leaders who claim Christ, sending out Christmas cards with their children holding weapons they can barely lift, with churches doing fundraisers using AR-15s, and with entire denominations making their beds with politicians whose empires have been built by the gun makers.

And as someone who has made their home within Christianity, the profoundly disheartening part of the Conservative Christian church's role in the worship of weapons is how fully antithetical it all is to the life and teachings of a rabbi who our tradition refers to as the Great Physician; a compassionate healer who preached the making of peace and the turning of the cheek, one who condemned retributive violence and who refused to meet force with force. To take up the cause of guns, even while we are plagued by unfathomable loss through their use, shows the disconnect between these

believers and the namesake of their tradition. They have lost the plot and the point of the Sermon on the Mount.

For this reason, Christian opponents of sensible gun legislation who seem to defend the weaponry and not the life brutalized by it rarely invoke Jesus in their justifications, but when they do, they invariably refer to a single story of Jesus warning his disciples of his imminent arrest by authorities, telling them to “bring a sword” when they return.

That one sentence, these folks will tell you, shows Jesus consenting to them being heavily armed, and essentially serves as a conversation stopper on any possible solutions to minimize the suffering around us. (How they connect the dots from a sword to a military grade weapon that can fire 45 rounds a minute, I can’t fathom, but that’s neither here nor there.) The problem in using this story is that these Christians stop the tape there as if nothing else of value follows. They conveniently refuse to play the movie forward just a couple of paragraphs to the moment when one of the disciples unsheathes his sword and cuts off the ear of one of Jesus’ potential Roman captors. They fail to acknowledge that Jesus rebukes his disciple, heals the soldier’s ear, and announces to the crowd that this violence, even in the name of protection, is not what his people will be known by. The full story is that Jesus gives a living parable about the Christian’s posture in the world and reminds us of the danger of living by the sword. It is a declaration of nonviolence and benevolence.

And so, whether we are Christians or not, we can and should confront professed followers of Jesus with Jesus, by reminding them of his words and his ways, and invite them to lean into his compassionate heart, so that they begin to operate less from a place of irrational fear.

That’s a little bit about how *we* ended up here, the way a religion and politics of fear have so addled people that they have had a 2,000-year mission drift away from the original invitation of the Sermon on the Mount, where the peacemakers and the merciful and the meek were what believers aspired to.

But I wonder how *you* ended up here tonight, the road you’ve traveled to this place, how this became a burden upon your hearts.

For me, my journey here began on a Friday in December of 2012. I had been a student pastor at that point for about 14 years, and was serving at a megachurch in Charlotte, NC... A couple of years earlier, I’d started a blog, writing mainly about youth ministry, grief, parenting, and love and justice in general terms. My audience was comprised largely of people within my congregation and other youth workers interested in the kind of work we were doing. During this time, I began to understand the political nature of ministry (with a small “p”); the many opinions I had to navigate, the collective expectations I needed to balance, the delicate threading of the needle that would cause the least resistance. And there was a growing tension between the person I was becoming as I leaned into the teachings of Jesus, and the pastor I was expected to be. As I prepared sermons and wrote blogs, I began to soften my words, to speak around issues, to dilute my message just enough to feel like I could escape turbulence.

But one Friday in November of 2012, I was standing in line in a mall food court and my wife called me in tears, asking if I’d heard the news about a shooting at a school in Newton, Connecticut called Sandy Hook. As she shared what had unfolded that morning, I remember feeling sick to my stomach, and by the time I got home, the scale and the scope of the horror became clear. And as I pored over the media reports, I read something that stopped me in my tracks: a popular Christian radio host and a Conservative politician had declared that this massacre was the fault of us taking God and prayer out of public schools. I couldn’t believe that professed followers of Jesus were using this moment of scalding grief and unfathomable sorrow to fuel a narrative that they could leverage to twist the narrative and shift the focus, people who could not even express grief or allow others to grieve.

I opened up a draft document in my blog and began writing, and for the first time, I wasn’t thinking about the people in my congregation or my pastor or the impact of my words on my job security; I was

unleashing the full, unedited contents of my heart. I published that piece, and it reached tens of thousands of people in a few hours, which, for me, was unthinkable. I began to hear from people all over this country who wanted to amen my words and to share their stories. That day, I realized that as someone in spiritual leadership, the only thing of value I had to offer was my unfiltered voice, that watering it down or softening my convictions was a betrayal of my calling. I decided from then on, I needed to speak and write with authenticity and specificity, push back and conflict and consequence be damned.

A few months later, I took a position in a new church in a new city, and after just a few months, I heard God calling me to leave that church—and it came in the form of my pastor's voice saying, "You're fired." It turns out, in my new community, authenticity and specificity were liabilities, at least when such things encroached upon the dominant culture, and this leads me to the faith communities many of us make our homes in.

If we want to develop strategies to change the trajectory of this nation regarding people of faith and the topic of gun violence, I think we need three things:

We need courage from our clergy. This moment in the collective story of our America is what spiritual leadership was made for. We who stand behind pulpits and upon platforms, who open sacred texts and try to mine wisdom for those we have a relationship and audience with, need to be fearless in our messaging right now, to speak with a specificity and authenticity that focuses not on maintaining comfort or appeasing congregants or keeping a ceremonial peace, but on bringing the necessary turbulence that mature spiritual community should be marked by, the kind substantive change cannot arrive without.

I've spoken to countless pastors, ministers, priests, imams, and rabbis who are feeling squeezed by the tension of attempting to simultaneously be prophetic and safe, which usually leaves them in the lukewarm space of moral compromise that Jesus would want no part of, the kind Dr Martin Luther King Jr. criticized harshly from a Birmingham jail cell.

A decade ago, I began to realize that when it came to the most critical issues facing me, in the setting in which I ministered, I could either be an authentic pastor or an employed pastor. I chose the former, and on the day I was, as we say, "released," it was a day of liberation for me because then, I could speak fully from conviction and not expectation.

Years ago, I remember sitting with a Philadelphia minister just before service as I was preparing to deliver a Sunday sermon to his community. I wanted to give him a heads-up about some of the potentially controversial words I planned to share, just to make sure they weren't misaligned with his heart, and he said, "No, say everything. I want to say this, but I can't." I said, "Well, you could, you just might end up out here with me."

Friends in ministry and leadership, I understand the tensions you minister in. I know the delicate balance between delivering hard words and respecting the diversity of the people in your care. And I would never be cavalier about your life's work, but I also know that when it comes to this wasteful, sickening plague of gun violence, our voices are the only thing of value we truly have. Our greatest calling is to be caretakers of the people in our path. So don't speak or write or preach to lose a job, but don't do so to keep one either. It's far more important to save lives than to save your parking space. This is a moment for brave leaders who understand that the cost of speaking pales to the cost of remaining silent.

So, we need courage from our clergy… and we need commitment from our congregations. Most people find themselves in spiritual communities for a variety of noble and beautiful reasons: because they feel seen there, because those spaces offer peace and rest in the disorienting storm of chaos, and because they believe they are with people with whom they are theologically and philosophically

aligned. And when we find such communities, they can become necessary places of refuge from the world, but they can also easily become insular and seductive, places where we begin to mistake comfort for virtue, a lack of conflict for spiritual health. We can easily nurture a false sense of intimacy based not on our shared values but on shared space.

David Spangler said: Some people think they are in community, but they are only in proximity. True community requires commitment and openness. It is a willingness to extend yourself to encounter and know the other. And it is the issues that incite the greatest passion that we often avoid when we should be leaning in. And leaning in is a challenge because it slows our churches down, it gets us off schedule, and it interrupts what we want to do. But what would it look like if we decided to leverage our Sunday mornings to have real, messy, unpredictable conversations on gun violence, and not rush to get back to the "real stuff" of our sermon series and holiday plans? What if we allowed the people in our communities to dictate the calendar?

The church should be the place where we can dive beneath the shallows of civility, decorum, and ceremonial unity, and into the depths of difficult conversations, awkward silences, and unresolved differences. We need to stay committed to the difficult, taxing, slow process of wrestling with complex issues that won't be wrapped up neatly in a 22-minute sermon or a Sunday school session or an afternoon lecture.

So, we need courage from our clergy, we need commitment from our congregations, and we need compassionate human beings who will demand both.

There's a toxic cocktail of self-preservation, laziness, aversion to conflict, and genuine fear of losing connection that keeps people silent in their places of worship. No one wants to be the creator of conflict or bring disruption to a community or start uncomfortable conversations or be disliked—but that's essentially the work Jesus found himself doing when his feet were on the planet, not because he wanted to cause injury to people but because of those who were already being injured. Over and over, Jesus centers empathy for hurting, vulnerable, oppressed human beings. The Gospel writer Matthew tells us that when Jesus "saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd." Friends, when we witness the unthinkable trauma that shooting victims endure, when we consider the debilitating grief so many survivors carry, when we watch elementary school kids in active shooter drills, how much more harassed and helpless can human beings be?

The word we translate as *compassion* has its original roots in the word *bowels*. It was once thought that the deepest emotions were housed in our organs, in our guts, so that connection between pain and bowels makes sense. Contained in that word is the idea that one could feel so deeply witnessing another's pain as to become internally disturbed, to the point of sickness.

This is why it's not inaccurate when we say that someone's story of suffering *moves* us. In the phrase, we're expressing that same internal solidarity with a person that reaches down into the very core of who we are, as we imagine their specific pain and feel some measure of it. We have all been sickened to our stomachs seeing the pain of other people.

There's an ancient phrase from this connection that says, "I am twisted in my bowels.
Question: What twists you in your bowels as you do this work?

Compassion is that stepping into the shoes of another, at the center of most faith traditions and moral codes, it is getting proximity to them, close enough to feel a bit of what they feel. And though such vicarious distress on behalf of another is an incredible gift, it's becoming more and more rare—and in fact is treated by some as a weakness.

What this means for each of us as people of faith, morality, and conscience is that we need to demand that our clergy be courageous, that our communities stay committed, and if they will not, part of our compassionate burden for hurting people might need to propel our exodus to a place where we can fully attend to the pain in our path.

So, we need courage from our clergy, we need commitment from our congregations, and we need compassionate human beings who will demand both.

One of the greatest lies people of faith of all traditions need to dismantle is the lie that we can't talk about the reality of gun violence in our spiritual communities because these are "political issues," which is, in theological terms, nonsense. If a religious person is trying to shut down conversation about the nearly daily mass murders here with the argument that it is supposedly political, that is an admission that their politics has superseded their spirituality, or that their political affiliations are tied to the guns more than those killed with them. Because to a spiritual person, every facet of this life is spiritual. There are no issues, from healthcare to immigration to women's rights to LGBTQ rights to climate change to gun violence, that exist disconnected from our belief system; in fact, those are the very places our values are incarnated. Obviously, I believe fiercely in separating Church and State, but I also believe it's impossible to separate our personal morality from the decisions we make when it comes to the politicians we choose to represent us and the party ideologies we align with and the legislation that creates the environment in which human beings exist, so we need to declare every issue on the table in our faith communities.

The other thing we need to do is to call out the subtle heresy of thoughts and prayers.

That has become the default response to every mass shooting: one that is essentially copied and pasted from one day to the next. We do not dismiss prayer, but we do not use it as an excuse to stay silent and still, because we know that thoughts and prayers alone aren't fixing this mess. What *will* alter the story we find ourselves in is prayerful people who reflect fully on the fractures and the malignancies and injustices in front of them—and decide they will change what they can change and do what they are able to do.

The prayer Jesus prays in the Sermon on the Mount is not concerned with escaping skyward to Heaven; it is bringing Heaven down. Heaven will come down, as ordinary mortals here on the ground endeavor to be the answer to as many of their prayers as possible. That's not to say that there aren't things working outside of what we can see and measure and quantify, but it means that we are able to do physical things (help and heal and give and protest and volunteer and canvass and vote) we have proximity and agency, and that if we do those physical things: in the small, close, here, now, and doable—then we will at least be able to welcome the mysteries, knowing we did all that we could with what we were entrusted with.

In these days, with so much that is untenable and threatening and worrisome, tossing off a quick "God's got it" is a subtle bit of heresy:

It imagines that God engineers election outcomes the same way as football scores.
It exonerates people from any culpability for a vote they perhaps now feel was regrettable.
It nullifies any concept of personal free will by giving God ultimate veto power over us.
It excuses inaction in the face of other people's present suffering.
In matters of injustice and suffering and evil, it essentially passes the buck to God.

But the story of the Scriptures is one of this same God, granting Humanity the power over their choices; giving them the ability to be co-creators in this world by the decisions they make. Though God *is* all-powerful, God does not exercise that power to coerce us. We are not mindless robots

simply performing the tasks we are pre-programmed to—we are fully responsible for the stuff we do and say, and think.

What this means is that saying *God is in control*, while doing little or nothing to alter the planet in any meaningful way, is spiritual rebellion. It is a willing abdication of our calling to be *makers of peace* and agents of goodness and bringers of justice here. It expects that God will clean up whatever horrible mess we make—and that our prayers alone will serve as the sole request form.

I don't believe this is true, and it isn't Biblical. I don't believe Jesus spent three years imploring people to love their neighbors as themselves, to feed the poor, to protect the vulnerable, to love our enemies, and to bind up wounds of strangers—if God had already written the script and we're all just playing the whole thing out in flesh and blood without getting to improvise and change lines.

And this all matters, because if we are *indeed* free to choose and responsible for our choices, and these decisions make tangible ripples in the world, then we had better get to work, Christians.

And that means far more than *thoughts and prayers* platitudes.

In the face of injustice, praying for God to move while remaining stationary isn't admirable—it's cowardice. It's looking around at the frightened, hurting, wounded people in our midst and shooting up a quick 911 call to the Almighty and continuing on with our day, instead of rolling up our sleeves and getting our hands dirty by stopping other people's bleeding.

God *is* love.
God *is* good.
God *is* powerful.
But God is not forceful, and God is not magic.
God works through the hands and words of the people who aspire to this love and goodness, and choose to exercise the individual power they have been entrusted with right where they're standing.
Jesus is not beamed down from Heaven; he is incarnated in the flesh and blood of those who believe that other people are worth sacrificing for, that mercy is the greatest gift, and that love is revolutionary.
God's Spirit of redemptive power resides in the *breathing churches* of we who inhabit this place and seek to be sanctuary for those in pain.

And right now, the ancient words of St. Francis are still the most dangerous prayer we can ever authentically pray: *God, make me an instrument of your peace.*

As people of faith, if we hope to alter the story, we're going to need to alleviate our brothers' and sisters' irrational fears and dismantle the false stories they give birth to; the enemies and adversaries they make out of their neighbors, and the dehumanization that makes violence acceptable, and even righteous.

We need to name the ways in which the white Evangelical Church is nurturing and perpetuating gun violence by constructing a Jesus-less Christianity, and to hold his words and teachings up to Conservative Christian community like a mirror and invite them to be honest about what they see reflected back.

We need courage from our clergy to speak with authenticity and specificity, we need commitment from our congregations to have the difficult conversations and sit with the discomfort, and we need compassionate human beings who will demand both; people who will reshape the communities with our presence or our absence.

And we need to refuse the lie that says we can't talk about gun violence in faith communities because such things are political, when they are inherently spiritual.

Today, I am going to ask you to be irrational. Irrationality and spirituality are often tethered together. (Examples) Hopelessness is probably the most rational response right now as we see so much brokenness in our nation, and as we face gun violence that seems to be rising exponentially.

Hopelessness makes sense right now, but we can't choose hopelessness because that would mean that we concede our nation's fate. Falling into permanent despair or apathy would be giving away, not merely the last few years but today and tomorrow, too. It would mean allowing those motivated by fear and exclusion to win the battle uncontested. Most importantly, hopelessness cedes the narrative within our heads to those who do not deserve that gift. Hope right now is a bit irrational, but that doesn't mean it's the wrong choice. It is always the right choice because it is the only one that keeps us moving forward. Especially for people of the resurrection.

In 1942, Jewish-Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, and philosopher Victor Frankl was sent to a German prison camp where he would be for three years while losing his father, mother, his brother, and his wife. Frankl ended up earning a PhD in philosophy from the University of Vienna and writing "Man's Search for Meaning" based on his experience in a prolonged period where nearly everything was out of his control nd the prospects were extremely dire, when life should have felt pointless. Frankl writes:

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

We choose our own way every day we wake up and step into the world, and are faced with challenges and questions and crises and heartbreak and tragedy. We decide whether circumstances will determine our internal condition, or whether we will, whether the trending news will dominate the headlines in our heads, or whether we will write a different story.

Frankl states: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

The present, like the one we sit inside today, the one you inhabit as you encounter these very words, is always that space between stimulus and response. In this space, we have one thing: the choices we make based on what we believe matters. We don't receive any guarantees of success or promises of health or assurances of safety. We also don't have control over the courts or the politicians or the systems—even while we work to nudge them in whatever ways we can individually and collectively. We do have the space between what happens and what we decide to do in response to what happens.

In this work as a collector of stories, there are patterns to what people share with me, especially if they come from historically vulnerable marginalized people groups: Whether transgender teenager, Muslim activists, migrant fathers, racial justice workers, They never say, "John, could you be less bold, could you be less loud, could you be less confrontational?" They never say, "Could you be nicer?" What they say is, "Why are so many people of faith so silent right now? Why is the only expression of Christianity I see something, so often fueled by exclusion and separation and cruelty, something that doesn't remotely resemble Jesus?"

This is our invitation.

Friends, I know you are disheartened and exhausted, and that you feel that the damage here is irreparable, but the only way that remains a certainty is if we do nothing.

We who inhabit this planet in these days have inherited it from them: the children, activists, caregivers, soldiers, helpers, and parents—the ordinary people who would not allow themselves to become so despondent or so weary in their present circumstance that they stopped giving a damn or making a life or bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice in any way they were able.

Now it's our turn. This is our moment to spend our fragile and fleeting sliver of space and time here, and for the sake of our predecessors in humanity and for our descendants who will be here after we're gone—we can't blow it.

We can't allow our present troubles to overcome us.
We cannot be overwhelmed by the pain in our path to the point where we are no longer willing to feel it or respond to it.
We can't wilt in the face of hateful, fearful people who would make the world less diverse and less equitable.
We can't become apathetic or stay silent or sidestep the turbulence of engaging the ugliness outside our doors or on our social media feeds or at our Thanksgiving dinners—because the multitudes whose feet traversed this place previously refused to.

So stay hopeful for all the heroes of our shared story, and for the billions of human beings whose names and faces and stories you'll never know, who refused to lose hope even as all hell broke loose around them, and allowed you to inherit a world worth saving.

Stay hopeful because you have breath in your lungs and a working heart planted firmly in your chest, and you have this day in which you can speak and live and create and work and resist and love.

You're here and alive. Honor those who are not by making sure you spend yourself on behalf of life.