Opinion

NCR Voices



A makeshift memorial is shown Tuesday, May 2, outside the home where a mass shooting occurred Friday, April 28, in Cleveland, Texas. Authorities say a man shot five of his neighbors, including a child, after they asked him to stop firing off rounds in his yard. The suspect was arrested May 2 after a four-day manhunt. (AP photo/David J. Phillip)



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Once again, I find myself in the infuriating position of responding to the news of yet another horrific mass shooting in the United States. Last Friday night (April 28) officials say a man in Cleveland, Texas, killed five people — including a 9-year-old child — after a neighbor had requested that he stop firing his gun in the middle of the night because the noise was keeping his baby awake. According to authorities, the 38-year-old man firing his gun refused the request and then allegedly took his AR-15 style-weapon next door where he killed half of the people in the neighboring house, including the child.

According to The Washington Post, "Police released the names of the victims: Sonia Argentina Guzman, 25; Diana Velazquez Alvarado, 21; Julisa Molina Rivera, 31; Jose Jonathan Casarez, 18; and Daniel Enrique Laso, 9."

Francisco Oropesa, who is suspected of the killings, allegedly fled the scene and was captured by authorities after a four-day manhunt involving hundreds of law enforcement officials.

As the Post reported, "This was the year's 19th U.S. shooting to kill at least four people, not including the shooter, according to the Gun Violence Archive, which tracks U.S. shootings."

And this is just the latest in a recent series of shootings that have resulted from close-proximity disputes, misunderstandings, rage and acts of impulsiveness. Put another way, these are "shootings carried out by armed Americans who have fired in response to what could have been normal, everyday interactions."

In April alone we have witnessed several of these horrific shootings. For example, there is the case of 16-year-old Ralph Yarl, a Black teenager who was looking for his siblings and rang the wrong doorbell in Kansas City, Missouri. He was shot by an 84-year-old white man, according to police.

In North Carolina, a 24-year-old man is accused of shooting a 6-year-old girl and her father, after neighbors said a basketball rolled into the man's lawn.

In New York state, authorities said a 20-year-old woman was shot and killed by a 65-year-old man after she accidentally pulled into the wrong driveway while looking for a friend's house.

In Illinois, police said a 59-year-old man was fatally shot in the head by his 79-year-old next-door neighbor, after getting into a dispute about the victim's use of a leaf blower in his own yard.

And, also in Texas, two teenage cheerleaders were shot in a grocery store parking lot after one of the young women accidentally got into the wrong car.

Tragically, this list could go on and on. Despite the common defensive refrain offered by gun advocates that "guns don't kill people, people kill people," the simple truth remains that people *with guns* kill people. And people with guns are killing more people every day and for seemingly trivial reasons, such as disputes over lawn maintenance equipment or unintentionally opening the wrong car door in a parking lot or accidentally pulling into the incorrect driveway.

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While much of the American population has grown numb to the reality and persistence of gun violence in this country, for those who do pause to reflect on the absurd culture of death that has grown out of Second Amendment advocacy and the gun lobbies, troubling questions quickly surface.

Why are so many people — with almost all of the suspects men — shooting other people for admittedly innocuous mistakes, misunderstandings or nothing at all?

A recent Washington Post article reflected on precisely this question. The conclusion, as reflected in the headline, was "it all goes back to fear."

Indeed, fear is a significant factor at play in the rise in this kind of violence. The Post article explains that in many of these shootings the alleged shooters claim a right of defense on account of fear. In some states, so-called "stand your ground" laws provide broad legal coverage for gun owners to shoot others, including unarmed

people, provided the shooter believes that their life is in danger.

But there is another emotion at play in many of these shootings: anger. While responding to the turn into the wrong driveway may be classified as motivated by fear, the neighbor in Texas accused of shooting up a household in the middle of the night or the neighbor in Illinois accused of shooting the user of a leaf blower are more likely grounded in anger.

Whether motivated by fear or anger, the common denominator, and what makes them lethal, is the presence of firearms. Without guns, perhaps there may have been an altercation, but there would not have been as much injury or death. Again, people *with guns* kill people.

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Obviously, gun violence and the cult of firearms in this country, in which some people worship the idol of guns at the altar of the Second Amendment, is a profoundly moral issue. But the Christian tradition has something to say here beyond the otherwise plain "Thou shall not kill" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus makes it clear over and over again in the Gospels that fear and anger are serious dangers that Christians must be alert to and overcome.

I have been thinking about fear and spirituality for several years now, including in these pages (I also have a book coming out early in 2024 with Paulist Press tentatively titled *Fear and Faith: Spirituality, Hope, and Wholeness in a Fractured World*). We all know how often Jesus tells his followers to “not be afraid.” But this series of horrendous shootings last month has me thinking about when Jesus also warns about the seductive and destructive force of anger, too.

For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus ties murder and anger together, admonishing his followers: "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (5:21-22).

When it comes to disputes between siblings (or *neighbors*!), Jesus lays out a rather lengthy process for resolving the argument. This is perhaps best seen in Matthew 18:15-19, which calls for dialogue, mediation or even separation, but not violence.

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Jesus consistently admonishes against using weapons or committing acts of violence, even in apparent self-defense, such as in the garden as he's being handed over to authorities or when you might seek revenge against someone who has wronged you.

Fear and anger are basic human emotions that everyone experiences, just as Jesus himself did. Famously, Jesus was clearly afraid the night before he was crucified and Jesus' righteous anger led him to overturn the tables in the temple, but one consistent factor is that Jesus never uses his fear or anger to harm another person nor does he sanction violence against any person. At every turn he preaches against violence, warns about the dangers of fear and anger, and admonishes his followers when they are inclined to harm others in any way.

While I still believe strongly that we need to do something to address the systemic addiction to guns in this country, I am enough of a realist to know that the financial and political forces are strongly set up against doing anything meaningful in the short term. Afterall, if this country could not be moved to meaningful action after repeated slaughter of *children* at the hands of gun owners, then I don't know what could compel America.

However, in the meantime, I think we also have a lot to do in terms of addressing the crisis of fear and anger in this country, especially when these emotions are intentionally stoked and harnessed by political, media and corporate forces that seek to capitalize from a culture that not only discourages others from loving one's neighbor, but actively encourages them to shoot their neighbors instead.