

It's MY RIGHT To Shoot You!

by Bentley de Bardelaben
Executive for Administration and Communications

As a parent, one of my worst fears would be to outlive my children. The loss of any loved one is tough enough. The loss of a child appears unbearable. As a minister, I have borne witness to it being the breaking point within a marriage, leaving healthy and unhealthy relationships irreversibly damaged. However to lose the life of a child due to extreme violence seems to merely intensify the heartache. This has become a regular occurrence in schoolyards across the United States.

But those tragedies are not my focus today. My attention is on the steady rise in the killing of unarmed teenagers and young people of color. The reasons cited for these shootings vary. What is consistent is that the shooter, often a white male, feels threatened and fires a weapon at the target of their fear. Such a framing holds true in the conditions surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin (age 17), Jordan Davis (age 17), and Renisha McBride (age 19).

This week, in Wayne County, Michigan the trial begins for Theodore Wafer (age 55). He is charged with shooting Ms. McBride in the face through his front porch screen door in November 2013. Of the three deaths cited, each occurred in states where there are “stand your ground laws”; Florida for the two young men and Michigan for the young woman. In total, there are 24 states which have “stand your ground laws” and they are spread across our nation as far Northwest as Washington, into the Southeast with pockets in the South and Midwest.

Just because a state has “stand your ground laws” doesn’t mean there will be a rise in vigilantism, which I understand as violence by an individual who perceives a “reasonable” imminent threat to his or her life, without any duty to attempt retreat. Yet it seems that where such laws exist, people will draw upon them as a possible defense. I understand that many of these laws were advocated as a way to address domestic abuse asserting that many women couldn’t retreat if attacked in her home.

According to a 2013 study, the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his shooter, George Zimmerman, is not unique. In “Operation Ghetto Storm,” the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement found that in 2012 at least 136 unarmed African Americans were killed by police, security guards and self-appointed vigilantes. That’s approximately one person killed every 28 hours.

I am not against anyone’s right to bear arms. I was raised in a family where hunting was the norm. I was trained how to handle and shoot different weapons, i.e. pistols, shot guns, and bows, as a youth. Further, I firmly support a woman’s right to defend herself in her home against an abuser. But what about the dynamic young lives that are being extinguished and the families which are left devastated? What legal protections are in place for them?

As the world prepares to watch yet another trial of innocent life lost in Michigan, I pray this time we will rally forth demanding justice. We the people collectively have the power to insist that laws -- state and federal -- are written which protect us. I believe the souls of those innocently slain are counting on us to do it. Sooner, rather than later, works for me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Bentley de Bardelaben is minister for administration and communications for the United Church of Christ’s Justice and Witness Ministries.

LEARN

ucc.org/justice

DONATE

bit.ly/donatejwm

ARCHIVE

WJ
f

bit.ly/witness4justice

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.