It may be that ever since Moses took chisel to stone and presented us with about 9 or 10 basic instructions for living we have been hedging our bets, editing, stretching, revising, interpreting.

You shall not murder. Full stop.

Is killing murder? What if you are a soldier and it is a just war? Is eating meat murder? But he was poor, abused. He was rich and powerful. It was self-defense. I didn’t know where they were taking the Jews. I’ve never met a sex slave. She was mentally ill. Is it my fault, what could I have done? He was a minor. She was thirteen but she is being tried as an adult. The building wasn’t up to code. She had no health insurance. They choose to live by the ocean. The ambulance took 20 minutes to arrive.

You shall not murder. Since the shooting in Las Vegas on October 1st, there have been 8 shootings in the US, resulting in 10 deaths and 25 injuries. In our country with 113 guns per person, the majority of gun deaths being suicide, more shootings than days in a year with an average of two dozen resulting in multiple deaths, the only thing unique about the mass shooting in Las Vegas is the yet undiscovered motive. There is no one to blame but the shooter. Is there?

It is easier for us to avoid our complicity in the deaths of 59 people and the injury of 530 people if there is someone to blame. He was mentally ill, he was black, he was poor, he was an immigrant, he was a Muslim, he belonged to a radical group, he was a vet with PTSD, he hated America. Nope.

No one can seem to explain away Stephen Paddock. White, wealthy, a nice neighbor, a successful gambler, his girlfriend seemed completely unaware of his plans. As a hostess in one of the high-end casinos, her job was to know what he liked to eat, what his habits were, how to keep him happy and gambling and spending money. But apparently she didn’t really know him.

No one really knew him. And perhaps that is as close to a motive as we will ever discover. No one really knew him.

We have another parable about a landowner in Matthew’s gospel today. The traditional interpretation is that we are the tenants to whom God has given this good earth to tend and care for, but we have behaved selfishly, as if the land and all its gifts, its creatures, and even other people belong to us. And so God sent prophets and holy people to warn us to turn from our evil ways, but we did not listen. So finally God sent his Son, preaching love and forgiveness, in hopes that we would listen. But we couldn’t or didn’t or wouldn’t and we killed him. And so God will take away the authority given to us, and give faith to those who are doing good work, and who recognize God as the author and source of all good things.

Every time I hear this parable I want to ask, why didn’t this powerful landowner just go and collect the harvest himself? Perhaps our reading from Exodus is a clue. “they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Afraid of what we will hear, we let others approach God for us.

Or read this parable from another perspective. Ask the ancestors of the slaves, bound by shackles, who picked the cotton and built the roads and factories of this nation under the whip and on the sale blocks. Who owns the land? Ask the Syrian children who are refuges in Lebanon, working for $4 a day to help feed their families. Who owns the harvest? Ask the people of Catalonia, the Rohingya people, the Kurdish people, who has authority to make decisions? Ask the mothers and fathers, the grandparents, the brothers and sisters of those caught up in gangs in Chicago. How many prophets must we send? How many sons and daughters must die?

Jesus said to them, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” If you feel overwhelmed by the realities of this life, if these are your stories, or they affect you, if you feel called to change these stories, perhaps you are the cornerstone Jesus is calling out.

Today members of our congregation Dolly Y. Frank G. along with many, many others, are running the Chicago marathon. They didn’t wake up yesterday and decide it would be fun to run today. They planned, they trained, they got injured, healed, kept up a discipline of eating, stretching, running, resting. And now today they run.

The problem of gun violence in our city and in our county is not a sprint. There is no quick fix, no simple answer, no one person or group to blame. The work of justice is a marathon. It takes discipline, perseverance, sacrifice, injury, errors, slow progress, starting over, staying committed. It cannot be achieved alone. But we must face it because our tolerance of senseless violence is a stone. And Jesus says “the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

And so we are comforted by the words of Paul, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus has called me, and you, us to be the cornerstone of change.