



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

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Episode 027: Hearing the call to prevent gun violence

For this episode we traveled south to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to Christ Episcopal Church and spoke with member Brenda Phillips, who shares her story on becoming involved in gun violence prevention ministry with host Deacon Harry Leip. Participating in an annual pilgrimage around the places in town where violence had occurred, praying, leaving crosses, hearing from families, witnessing-- was the catalyst for Brenda's going deeper into this ministry of hope and education and presence.

Harry Leip: Welcome to JesusHacked. I'm your host for this podcast, Deacon Harry Leip, serving at Trinity Central West End in St. Louis City. As many of our listeners know, ministries take many shapes and forms in each of our churches. What may work for one church may not very well work for another and so all those ways that each church finds in ministry are also as varied as their people.

So today, we're coming to you from the southern part of the diocese at Christ Episcopal Church in beautiful downtown Cape Girardeau, where the community has begun a new ministry which deals with gun violence. And to help with that discussion, we will be joined by Brenda Phillips, a parishioner at Christ Episcopal Church. Brenda, welcome to the podcast.

Brenda Phillips: Thank you.

Harry Leip: So, I want to start with, you know, gun violence, as we know, is often seen as a big-city, urban issue-- that's certainly what hits the news. But what does it look like in southeast Missouri?

Brenda Phillips: In southeast Missouri, we have a large community of people who are hunters that enjoy the gun sports. We do have violence, it's prevalent in this city, as well as in our southern city cities. This September we have been free of violence, which was a wonderful thing for us.

Harry Leip: Great.

Brenda Phillips: This city is beautiful, we're very active. We have a lot of wonderful things to offer, but the guns are always there. I think a lot of it could be attributed to the presence of drug trade. There is one area of our city that does seem to have more violence than the others and that has sort of been my focus, working with a local group, to try to bring Christ into that neighborhood, to be a physical presence, as a witness, and also to bring prayer to them. And that's been part of my development working with gun violence.

Harry Leip: Great. And that sounds, outside of just being awesome work, how did you get involved in that, because it sounds like that is something that I can tell you're quite passionate about. What drew you into that ministry?

Brenda Phillips: There was a little flyer that was present in our church last May and it was in the narthex, on a table, and I happened to walk by and see it and I thought "well, what's a SNAVP walk?" And I was talking to my friend, so I just picked it up and threw it into my purse. And I took it home, put it on my desk and that next week, I kept walking by and looking at it and thinking "well, what is this all about?" And I read it again and I called Reverend Edie, or I texted her I believe, and I said "is anyone else going on this walk from the church", you know, you always want a friend along.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: And she said, "I'm going and I'd be happy to walk with you." "Okay, I'm gonna go and see what this is about." So I went, and two other parishioners were there.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: And I really didn't know what to expect, but I felt my heart opening that day.

Harry Leip: Okay. And you said this was a SNAVP walk?

Brenda Phillips: Walk.

Harry Leip: Is SNAVP a group?

Brenda Phillips: Yes, it's an organization in town and it stands for Stop Needless Acts of Violence Please, and the lady who formed the group, Felice Roberson, a woman of color, lost her son a couple of years ago, a random shooting at a party, 60 people were present, not one spoke about who had done it.

Harry Leip: Really.

Brenda Phillips: And she suffered for a year and a half and finally she said "enough" and she formed this group. So once a year, in June, they do a walk and it's 2.7 miles. We walked to locations where violence had occurred. It was the most moving thing I've ever done in my life. When we got there, they told the story of the victim. If the family was present, they were recognized and prayed for. We prayed for the victim and we prayed for the person who had committed the crime. We sang songs, left the cross, as I said, on the yard and then walked to the next place. So the whole time you're walking, you're reflecting on what you just heard and saw and you're wondering what's ahead, because this was my first walk.

Harry Leip: Wow. And to use a church word, that sounds like quite a witness that you're doing at each and every location of this-

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: -horrible violence, sort of bringing the community and bringing the church into that space.

Brenda Phillips: You're very visible as a witness. And we even stopped at a yard where a child had been shot.

Harry Leip: Oh, gosh.

Brenda Phillips: And that was very hard. So by the end of the walk, we gathered at the park, and we didn't get to stay for all of that service, but then we came home. And the follow-up to that was, on Tuesday nights, they do a street-side vigil, and they choose a location in the city where a crime has been committed, not necessarily a homicide, but an assault or something violent, and those four corners of that intersection are committed to Christ. There's prayer, there are songs, there are posters, and we have people stopping in cars asking for prayer, people walking up asking for prayer. I'd never done anything like that before.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: And it was so moving and I knew that I had to do more.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: And that's when I contacted Edie, Reverend Edie, and she told me about Lock It for Love.

Harry Leip: And so this evening, like you talked about, would I be correct in assuming that it's not just you, as a member of the Episcopal Church, but it's other faith traditions coming together.

Brenda Phillips: Yes, yes, there are three or four different churches that I know that are represented.

Harry Leip: And so in that common ministry, those denominational barriers sort of fade away because it's more focused on the horribleness of that violence.

Brenda Phillips: And the presence of Christ.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: People that are there, we know that we have different backgrounds, but it's so love-filled and we all have a single minded purpose, that it's perfectly wonderful.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: And I have formed some really close relationships from that group.

Harry Leip: And you all meet on a regular basis-

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: -doing this work and, not only holding up the community in prayer, but it also sounds like holding each other in that sort of common prayer for a better day.

Brenda Phillips: Yes, yes.

Harry Leip: And you mentioned that you're involved with Lock It for Love, which I know we talked about in a prior podcast, and I saw some pictures on Facebook, can you tell us what that was like? You were part of a display where you were handing these out?

Brenda Phillips: Yes. We have gone, in the last two weeks, I guess, it's been now, to a rather large health fair, farther down into the [inaudible 00:06:21]. It was a health fair, but from the Department of Defense-

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: -and the Delta Area Regional Authority. We didn't really know what to expect, that was our first experience, so to speak, on the road.

Harry Leip: Oh, okay.

Brenda Phillips: Yes. We were green and new and very excited. Met some wonderful people and saw some dire poverty. I was overwhelmed with the number of guns that individuals owned.

Harry Leip: Really? Can you say a little more about that. Is this from people you spoke to?

Brenda Phillips: The one incident I will share with you, the gentleman who was at a table next to us was talking about his brother-in-law, and he commented that he had 30 guns in his home. And the thing that most shocked me was this gentleman also keeps a loaded rifle beside his recliner every night, as he watches television, while his children play in front of him. And it distressed me on so many different levels.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: Because what we try to do, when we do Lock It for Love, is talk about modeling responsible behavior as adults. And what does that say to children, when daddy's got a loaded gun?

Harry Leip: When it's so casual.

Brenda Phillips: So casual.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Brenda Phillips: And what if that gun slips and falls? What if he falls asleep and a child picks it up? There were so many questions in my mind. And the gentleman said "we don't even go back to his home anymore because we're so concerned."

Harry Leip: Hmm.

Brenda Phillips: And that was one story. We heard stories of parents keeping loaded weapons under their beds, both the mother and the father. Now I, as a child, I was curious, I played hide-and-seek under my mother's bed. That's where Christmas presents held, were put away safely, as my mother thought. So how do you tell a child "that's loaded, don't touch it" and expect them to listen to you. Children don't listen, they're curious.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: And that's a child potentially lost.

Harry Leip: Absolutely.

Brenda Phillips: So that's so hard to hear.

Harry Leip: So, again, that word witnessing, you and other peoples are helping with this table and having these, sounds like, sort of no stress conversations.

Brenda Phillips: Absolutely.

Harry Leip: Just talking and sharing.

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: And the goal is to hand out gun locks, I believe.

Brenda Phillips: And to educate.

Harry Leip: Oh, okay, so a dual role.

Brenda Phillips: Yes, yes. We just don't hand out locks. We explain how they work, why we want them to use them, even if they have a gun case or a gun cabinet, that guns should still be locked. So I don't know about you, but I forget things a lot.

Harry Leip: So, if I came to your table, what would you tell me? Why would I need a gun lock if it's safe in my house and hidden somewhere?

Brenda Phillips: There's no such thing as hidden from a child, they'll find it.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Brenda Phillips: And if you have it in a gun case, that's excellent, but you may forget to lock the case, you may walk away-

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: -and there's the gun. So you want your ammunition stored separately from the gun and hopefully secured. You want the gun lock in place, so you have all these safeguards.

Harry Leip: Wow. I can tell, you've definitely got this down to a really specific and very safe conversation.

Brenda Phillips: And it's usually done with humor. We laugh a lot, you know-

Harry Leip: Sure.

Brenda Phillips: -and it's not threatening. I don't want to take their guns away. That's a Constitutional right, so I don't want anyone to feel angry or upset. And I haven't had one person be defensive or accusatory. They're very open and they want to learn. But we talk about children and safety. And I'd like to share one story, if I may.

Harry Leip: Sure, absolutely.

Brenda Phillips: My very first experience, I went with one of the ladies from Lock It for Love to north St. Louis County, had a lovely day, we gave away 40 gun locks.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Brenda Phillips: We talked to children, you know, "what would you do if you found a gun, on the street, in the playground, at friend's home, what would you do?" This is part of the education, and they would always say "oh, I'd tell my teacher, I'd go get my mom." There was a mother with three little girls that visited our table-

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: -and after I had educated the mother, I chose to speak to the middle girl. She was very charming and I chose to speak with her, and said "what would you do if you found a gun?" And this little sweetheart smiled, the sweetest smile you've ever seen, and to my question she replied "shoot it."

Harry Leip: Wow.

Brenda Phillips: I stepped back. The lady next to her just absolutely was out of control angry. "What are you saying? What are you saying? Did your daddy tell you?" "I'm gonna talk to my brother." Well now, it's the aunt, and she's upset this little girl is saying this. The little girl continued to smile and-

Harry Leip: As if it was nothing unusual.

Brenda Phillips: Mm-mm (negative), nothing at all. And she said "we're gonna have a conversation tonight, you better believe it." And she looked at me and said "may I hug you? No one has asked me before what I would tell my children if they found a gun," and I knew then this is what I wanted to do.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Brenda Phillips: Because that may be one little child that was saved that day and it just made me feel that I hadn't wasted that day at all.

Harry Leip: Of course. And since we know children, certainly at that age, are so brutally honest, I mean, much more honest than you and I are, or adults are, I just can't imagine how powerful that is, that moment of acknowledgement, that moment that that family realizes what that child has absorbed and obviously taking steps to change that narrative.

Brenda Phillips: Exactly.

Harry Leip: Wow. So Brenda, obviously I hear a great amount of passion and heart in this, how has that been received by your community, since you initially found this because of a flyer? Is that a conversation that is also happening at Christ Episcopal Church here?

Brenda Phillips: We are communicating our activities, our involvement in the community and activities outside the city that we're doing through our bulletin. Edie keeps those in front of them so that they know about it.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Brenda Phillips: Right now there are two members of our parish that go with me, there's always two of us when we go out to health fairs, sort of our team that we're working with, and I am scheduled to do an adult education class on October 22nd, to bring this to them even more, and I expect more involvement. I think, as I talk to my friends in the church, they're becoming aware, we talk about SNAVP all the time, and I think that we're going to see a great deal more involvement.

Harry Leip: And I love that story in the Bible, where Jesus is sending up the disciples, two by two, and I love that image that other people are along with you because that's community going to another community and sharing the good news. And plus, in such a place with violence and despair, how does, with so much of this in the news, such violence in the news, and I know, I'm guessing that Cape Girardeau does not have anywhere near the gun death statistics that St. Louis/Kansas City does, but how are you sustained in this when there's so much despair and negativity, and certainly political fodder, around this issue in general. What sustains you in this ministry?

Brenda Phillips: The success stories, knowing that we've made, feeling that we've made a difference. We talked about the SNAVP vigils and how we come away from those feeling reenergized, because it is that group of people from different backgrounds working together and we share that common

goal and we reenergize from that. When we go to the health fairs and we talk to these people and I feel that they've heard me.

I will share a story. The other night at the SNAVP meeting, SNAVP's monthly meeting, I did a little presentation and one member of the Salvation Army came out and said "I am not staying." She said "I don't have any guns, I really don't think..." And I said, "do you have grandchildren?" And she said, "yes, I do." And I said, "have you talked to them about what to do if they were at someone's house and actually found a gun?" And she said, "you know, I haven't, I think I'll stay." She stayed. She came back in the parking lot right before I left and said "I'm so glad I stayed, I had never thought about it, I'm going to talk to all of them."

So it's little things like that, it just kind of feeds us and keeps us going, and that's how it affects me. If I'm making any difference at all, I get those little moments to say "you're doing the right thing, keep going." And I think the other girls that are with me, I've heard them speak, too, about how much it means. So I think it's good and I think that more people will get involved in church.

In fact, from my centering prayer group, one of the ladies that attends that had seen it on Facebook that we were doing this and she asked me about it. She said, "well, could I go with you sometime?" And she's a different church, she doesn't even belong to our church. So if that reaches out into the community, what a wonderful thing that will be.

Harry Leip: Absolutely.

Brenda Phillips: We can maybe have more than one team, you know, that can do things.

Harry Leip: Right. And I love that image that it sort of gets bigger, as more people are aware of it, and realize that they can be a part of something that is working to change things.

Brenda Phillips: And it's so non-threatening. I've never once been uncomfortable. I've never had anyone be confrontational, to be angry, I've never had that. Most people are very receptive, they listen, and we give them flyers from Women's Voices Being Raised, about Lock It for Love, that are so beautifully written and they do a beautiful job with this, and we always give them these flyers to take home. So if maybe I've missed something, they can go over this and they'll have that as a resource.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. And I think we'll have that resource attached to this podcast, but can you just tell our listeners one or two brief things that these handouts are telling people.

Brenda Phillips: One I especially like, because sometimes I have people come to the table who say "I don't own a gun right now, but I'm going to buy one." And this one is titled "Does a gun in your home make you safer?" And it actually talks about the negative side of gun ownership.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Brenda Phillips: Someone could break in and steal your gun, go commit a crime or hurt you, and abusive spouses are more likely to be targeting you and hurting you if there's a gun in the house, suicide victims, those sorts of things.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Brenda Phillips: There's one about children are safer in homes, it talks about keeping your gun safe, a gun safe away from the children, and it also talks about if your child goes to someone else's home, don't hesitate to say to them, the people that your children are going to, "you have guns in your home, how do you store them?"

Harry Leip: Like you shared earlier, start having these explicit conversations.

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: Don't just assume that children-

Brenda Phillips: Exactly.

Harry Leip: -know what to do-

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: -when they're unattended.

Brenda Phillips: And it's not always the poor, depressed areas that have homes with guns.

Harry Leip: Of course.

Brenda Phillips: Some of the nicest people have guns and, if they're not properly stored, your child is at risk, so that's one. And the other one is a strong link between firearms and suicide, and we really talk about that, especially with teenagers. A bad hair day can be a crisis moment for a teenager, broken relationship, failed test, there's a gun in the home, that's an opportunity for something to happen.

Harry Leip: Right. And that flash of emotionalism-

Brenda Phillips: Yes.

Harry Leip: There's a way to do harm that's right there within a few arms' reach.

Brenda Phillips: And violence is, it's so ... I don't think children really understand what it is. I mean, it's the video ... and I don't mean to sound like an older person talking about video games, but all of the electronic media, everything that they do, the movies, it's just right in their face.

Harry Leip: Right.

Brenda Phillips: And so they don't understand there are consequences.

Harry Leip: Of course.

Brenda Phillips: And so that's what we want to make sure that they understand.

Harry Leip: Right. We talk about transformation and change, and so, I just want to bring it back to yourself and your own heart and your experience, now that you've been doing this work for a bit, is how has it transformed you? How has it transformed who you are and how you perceive God? Where is that transformation and God in all of this?

Brenda Phillips: It has opened my heart in so many ways, to people, to situations, circumstances, to the plight of children, and when I stand on the street corners on Tuesday night, Felice always quotes the Bible verse "where two or three are gathered, I am with you" and you feel the presence and it's so strong. And you come away with this, and I used the word reenergized a while ago, but it's a true mission, it's a true purpose now for me and I'm so grateful to be doing it. It has made my life so much richer.

Harry Leip: Wow. Well, thank you for those words, I appreciate it, and thank you for your time, Brenda, I think this has been a wonderful conversation.

Brenda Phillips: Thank you.