

“Here to Love“

1 John 4: 16-21

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Once again we have lived through a terribly sad week. Last week around this time, we asked for prayers for the victims and their families of the Orlando shooting, not yet fully knowing the extent of the carnage done by one man, armed with an assault rifle and a hand gun. He killed 49 people – beautiful, talented, smart, hard-working, and kind people who had gathered at Pulse, an Orlando night club, for Latin night. Pulse was not just a gay night club, but a community center, a place where the LGBTQ family of Orlando, FL gathered for support.

This latest mass shooting is so far the most devastating. 49 plus one lives lost. 53 people injured. For those who have lost loved ones, and for those who were injured, their lives have changed forever on June 12, 2016. I say “so far,” because unless we do something about gun laws and gun violence in our country, it will not be the last one. Apparently, since last Sunday, assault rifles are flying off the shelves. There are a few things about my chosen home country that I will never understand.

What makes this deadly attack even more disturbing is that it was done to harm a minority group of people – the LGBTQ community – who has been the recipient of violence and hate crimes many a time, and more often than not with no consequence; a community of people I am part of. It just brings it a bit closer to home, doesn't it?

And once again, we ask questions when disaster strikes: Why did this happen? Who is at fault here? Who can we blame for this? It is our human nature that we want and need to find answers. It is human nature to make someone responsible for this and any terrible, devastating mess.

And when we don't like the answers that are forming in our hearts we go after God. Where was God? Why didn't God prevent this carnage? Why would God, who we are told is love, allow something like this to happen? We know its bad theology, but it helps, maybe, to rid us of our own responsibility in the matter.

This time, or even better, let us never make God responsible for what happened in Orlando (or anywhere else) but let's place the responsibility where it belongs. It belongs to the gun man who, out of hate and anger and resentment, decided to kill. Maybe some responsibility goes to his wife who saw something but did not speak up. It belongs to businesses who think that guns and ammunition should be made readily available to anybody. It goes to politicians and groups within government who refuse to support changes to gun laws so that assault rifles never get into the hands of ordinary citizens. Again, I don't understand why anyone thinks owning an assault rifle is necessary unless, of course, the intent is to kill. The responsibility needs to be shared with religious and political bodies who keep the constant rhetoric and hate speech going that demonizes gays and lesbians and same

gender loving people. The responsibility also belongs to those who, when something horrific like in Orlando happens, all they have left to give is a moment of silent prayer.

Unless we take a sobering look at the places of responsibility that led this deadly night on June 12 and work on changing what is, it will happen again and again. I won't be putting this sermon too far away because I will have to preach it again. And honestly, I don't want to. And you don't want to hear it either – again.

So what are we to do as people of God, as followers of Christ? What are we to hope for in this time of darkness?

First “we need to weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn.

My hope is that we mourn with hope in our hearts. My hope is that this horrific event will move the church and all of us to pursue justice, grace and love for every person all the more.

My hope is that persons of faith will wake up to the reality that every person in their own diversity – be it ethnicity, skin color, sexual orientation, or religion - is our neighbor and even more significantly, is made and bears the image of God and is loved by God.

The mass shooting at the Pulse night club is a sobering reminder of too many terrible realities we live with every day. It would be too easy to give in to hate, too easy to target vulnerable populations, too easy to abuse the freedom to own guns, and tragically, way too easy to devalue human life.

The tragedy in Orlando also needs to be a reminder to Christ's church that our LGBTQ neighbors are vulnerable. Our church and First Parish are welcoming and affirming churches, and we live in good neighborhoods and a good state. But that is not the case everywhere. There are still too many people and voices filled with hatred in our society and in representative within different faiths and sadly even within our own Christian faith who try their best to devalue their, ours, my humanity as a gay person(s).

And for religious leaders, to attempt to link this tragedy to the will of God for LGBTQ people and expressing sadness over the fact that not more “pedophiles” were killed that night, we simply need to say, “Shame on you!”, and in particular, “Shame on you!” pastor Roger Jimenez of Verity Baptist Church of Sacramento, CA.

The Orlando tragedy is the outworking of a broken heart, which harbored hate and a view of God that would allow for such actions. There can be no room for such a view of God in the Christian community. The beauty of Christianity is presented to us all in a savior who would die, in order that all may live. He died so that we may know what love is.

This is the very antithesis to killing or dehumanizing in Christ's name. The message of Christ's unconditional love and sacrificial life for all is the message that all who name Christ as their Lord should rally around.

It took me a while to hone in on a scripture reading for today. 1 John 4, 21 puts it brilliantly: "Whoever loves God, must love their sisters and brothers." It is that simple.

We have all seen the incredible depths of love that human beings are capable of. Beyond mere attraction and affection, we've seen love go so deep into unconditional commitment to those we love, amazing service to those who need our love, and even heroic self-sacrificial love to others – sometimes to strangers who need the protection of love. "God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." (1 John 4:16b) I believe that is true whether those who love are religious or not, or even have rejected religion for its sometimes painful absence of love.

We have just seen what happens when God's love has not found a home in one heart which led him into an appalling and frightening depth of hate and death. Hate is the denial of the image of God in the other human beings we have decided to use, abuse, and even kill. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8). Hate is not only the antithesis of love; hate is the antithesis of God.

Our faith is about love – experiencing God's love and then sharing it with the world, sharing it with our brothers and sisters, even with those who don't share our faith. Our faith can never be a reason to turn away from each other, but it should be ...must be... the reason we turn toward each other and press in, even when we don't agree or understand at times. Christ calls us to nothing less no matter who our neighbors are.

What can we do to be the people of God in this moment and beyond?

Today, and in the coming weeks and months, we can model the way of Jesus, who wept over the loss of Lazarus' life, when we weep over the loss of lives that he surely loved. We must mourn the beautiful lives that have been lost.

May we be, today and in the weeks to come, be the hands and feet of Jesus, offering care, prayer, and support. Tonight, come and attend the prayer vigil offered by the Needham Clergy Association. We are all called to love, live, and speak the good news of the Gospel even more clearly! Christ alone can bring the healing so desperately needed in the wake of Orlando

May we be the people of God when we resist the divisions of our culture and society over LGBTQ rights. Let us be the best Open and Affirming church that we can be in our place and time and ministry.

Let us speak up and say something! Let's not wait but be a voice for justice and love. When anyone is devalued or dehumanized because we disagree with their choices and identities, followers of Christ should be the first to say something that affirms the whole person and with that God's image.

Let us be the people of God that actively involve ourselves in initiatives to end violence, be it gun violence, or domestic violence, or violence against sexual and gender minorities. Let us be better at valuing all life and extend dignity to all because we all bear God's image and we are all loved deeply by the God who chose us as partners.

Let us reflect upon our hearts and ask the Spirit of God what God is leading us to do next, what barriers to love need to be taken down, and ask what love looks like. Hard and profitable conversations can lead to a deeper level of empathy and change hearts.

We can and should be the people of God that intentionally pray for and comfort our LGBTQ family, neighbors, baristas, waiters, coworkers, and more who feel even more scared and vulnerable, because of the Orlando tragedy.

Finally: may our hearts always, always be open, inclusive, welcoming, and full of love. At our best, may we experience in each other - here at church, in our families, in the places of work and leisure, the community of discipleship - in action that which makes Christ's love tangible and concrete. We are here to love and be loved, unconditionally, with every ounce of our being.

Amen