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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
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Scripture: Psalm 42 and Luke 8:26-39

Reform theologian Karl Barth famously said one should preach “with the Bible in one hand, newspaper in the other.” Both have been difficult reads, and even more difficult realities, this week.

Today’s story from the Gospel of Luke features demons and mass swine suicide, which makes the realist and the vegetarian in me both uneasy.

This week’s newspapers (and television news, and radio shows and podcasts, and blogs) have been covered by the latest gun violence in Orlando. Forty-nine people killed, at least 53 wounded -- mostly Latino members of the LGBTQ community. And a violently disturbed gunman, with a history of domestic violence, speculated to have been afflicted by internalized homophobia, claiming inspiration from multiple terrorist groups.

It has been a heavy, heavy week, unbelievable in the familiarity of these facts and feelings, and this week I resonate with being plagued by demons.

I resonate with our collective humanity being plagued by demons. Too many of us are like the Gerasene man, driven by destructive forces from places of belonging and togetherness into tombs of isolation and death. Too many of us -- not only Omar Mateen -- have been seized by a legion of evil spirits:

homophobia,

Islamophobia,

hijacked religion,

intensely harmful political rhetoric,

lack of mental health care,

unwavering allegiance to guns...

All of this intersecting in Orlando's Pulse nightclub last Sunday and in the hours and days that have followed:

the beyond comprehension rise of gun sells after attacks like this and immediately following conversations about gun reform;

the rise of discrimination and hatred against Muslims after this atrocious act that defies true Islamic beliefs and spirit;

responses from some that this massacre was justice being served, the LGBTQ community reaping what it sows...

Like the psalmist, we cry out. Our souls are disquieted.

And we should be dis-quieted, we should be angry and devastated, and we should be loud about it.

The cover of the INDY this week reads, "No more thoughts. No more prayers." above a picture of an AR-15, the military style assault rifle responsible for the deaths in Orlando, San Bernadino, Aurora, Sandy Hook. Inside it quotes several of our state and local politicians who made statements following the Orlando shooting promising the victims' families their "thoughts and prayers..." Underneath each of those prayer pledges,

the newspaper lists the same politicians' voices and votes against gun regulation reform, against protection of our LGBTQ citizens.

I wonder, with very little patience, what exactly these politicians are thinking and praying. Because careful and compassionate thinking, sincere praying, doesn't lead to inaction, and it definitely doesn't lead to injustice. We don't have any more time for faith without works.

So I fully agree with the INDY's point, though not necessarily with the surface message on the cover. We do need to critically think and pray -- together -- about the stories and statistics behind gun violence, homophobia, Islamophobia... about why we put the 2nd Amendment above the Greatest Commandment, why we cling to the right to a well-regulated militia over the call to be the beloved kingdom of God.

The roots for the word "amen," what we so often say at the end of our prayers, means "so be it" or "so it is." If we are going to utter the word, we better be ready to open our eyes and be part of making it happen.

Rev. Amy Butler, senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, wrote this earlier this week: "And because we have not stepped with courage into the task of preaching love, we have contributed as our country has brutally expressed its second freedom, the freedom to arm itself. We've stood by watching while our fellow Americans have armed ourselves with ideologies of hatred and fear, prejudice and bigotry. And then, after the sowing of these seeds of sin, we have nurtured them to full bloom, arming ourselves with assault rifles and high capacity magazines."

Butler is writing specifically to her fellow ministers, saying that those of us who don't speak up and out about hatred and bigotry and the deadly culture of gun violence are committing malpractice. And I agree one thousand percent.

But there's more. In our church, Lance and I aren't the only ministers. At Pilgrim, and in the United Church of Christ, every member is a minister. We are all called to the work of hospitality, affirmation, and justice, to being together a continuous revelation of God's fierce compassion in our communities.

There are and will be people among us -- family and friends and neighbors -- who are like the witnesses and hearers in Luke's story, who are comfortable with the demons that possess us, who rely on them in some way, who are frightened by the loss of familiarity or power or privilege that may be compromised by the liberation of others.

It didn't stop Jesus from calling out the demons. Jesus didn't come so that we could live among the tombs. Or in closets.

But too many of us will if we don't disrupt and disarm the current culture of unchecked fear that leads to hatred -- that is not who we are, that is not who we are called to be, that is not what we are to call out in others.

What we call out in others matters. Our words matter. Our words of affirmation and our words of hate. And sometimes our words of apathy -- the words we do not say -- speak loudest of all.

Our silence, our apathy and inaction, in the face of these phobias is impotent faith. It is sin.

We are part of a faith tradition that celebrates the Word made flesh, God's ancient and eternal words about love and mercy and justice... made incarnate in the life of Jesus -- as real, as living, as close to us and as part of us as possible...

So living fully, openly, out loud about who we are, matters -- who we *all* are as children of God. Each one of us wonderfully made, uniquely made, and worthy to be loved -- no one of us more so than the others. All of us depending on the image of God in one another to know who God is, to be beloved community, to bring the kingdom of God --

whomever we love,

with whatever gender(s) we identify and express ourselves,

as sisters and brothers and followers of Jesus, part of a faith that is rooted in the act of resurrection,

that will not be afraid and we will not be quiet about these truths that are communally-evident:

that we are beloved, and they are, too -- whoever “they” are -- on whatever other side,

that we must affirm and protect one another’s sacred worth, which reflects our own,

that we are not free if our whole body, and all members of it, is not free.

Luckily God is still in the business of liberation. If you listen, you will hear Her say, “You know who you are, Beloved. Come out. Shine bright.”

Before the terror began in the early morning hours last Sunday, those who lost their lives spent their last hours in this earthside existence dancing and holding hands and laughing and singing... hopefully celebrating and being proud of who they were.

Today we lift their names and light candles to remember the bright light of their lives that darkness cannot overcome...

Stanley Almodovar III, 23 years old

Amanda Alvear, 25 years old

Oscar A Aracena-Montero, 26 years old

Rodolfo Ayala-Ayala, 33 years old

Antonio Davon Brown, 29 years old

Darryl Roman Burt II, 29 years old

Angel L. Candelario-Padro, 28 years old

Juan Chevez-Martinez, 25 years old

Luis Daniel Conde, 39 years old

Cory James Connell, 21 years old

Tevin Eugene Crosby, 25 years old

Deonka Deidra Drayton, 32 years old

Simon Adrian Carrillo Fernandez, 31 years old

Leroy Valentin Fernandez, 25 years old

Mercedez Marisol Flores, 26 years old

Peter O. Gonzalez-Cruz, 22 years old

Juan Ramon Guerrero, 22 years old

Paul Terrell Henry, 41 years old

Frank Hernandez, 27 years old

Miguel Angel Honorato, 30 years old

Javier Jorge-Reyes, 40 years old

Jason Benjamin Josaphat, 19 years old

Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, 30 years old

Anthony Luis Laureanodisla, 25 years old

Christopher Andrew Leinonen, 32 years old

Alejandro Barrios Martinez, 21 years old

Brenda Lee Marquez McCool, 49 years old

Gilberto Ramon Silva Menendez, 25 years old

Kimberly Morris, 37 years old

Akyra Monet Murray, 18 years old

Luis Omar Ocasio-Capo, 20 years old

Geraldo A. Ortiz-Jimenez, 25 years old

Eric Ivan Ortiz-Rivera, 36 years old

Joel Rayon Paniagua, 32 years old

Jean Carlos Mendez Perez, 35 years old

Enrique L. Rios, Jr., 25 years old

Jean C. Nives Rodriguez, 27 years old

Xavier Emmanuel Serrano Rosado, 35 years old

Christopher Joseph Sanfeliz, 24 years old

Yilmary Rodriguez Solivan, 24 years old

Edward Sotomayor Jr., 34 years old

Shane Evan Tomlinson, 33 years old

Martin Benitez Torres, 33 years old

Jonathan Antonio Camuy Vega, 24 years old

Juan P. Rivera Velazquez, 37 years old

Luis S. Vielma, 22 years old

Franky Jimmy Dejesus Velazquez, 50 years old

Luis Daniel Wilson-Leon, 37 years old

Jerald Arthur Wright, 31 years old