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“Let Us Love”

**A sermon following the massacre of 49 individuals in Orlando, Florida,
and the one-year anniversary of the massacre
in Charleston, South Carolina, at Mother Emanuel Church
by Mindy L. Douglas**

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

June 19, 2016

Psalms 42-43; Galatians 3:23–29; Luke 8:22–25

Oh, friends. How can it be that we gather together to mourn after yet another massacre has taken place in our nation? How can it be that we are confronted once again with a grief so deep and painful caused by a hatred so monumental and a fear so pervasive that one man, one single man could slaughter 49 innocents in Orlando in the middle of the night. His hatred was targeted. He chose to kill at the gay nightclub, Pulse. He chose to kill during Pride month, on Latin night. It was one year, almost to the day, after the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage. He chose a weapon that would kill many in a short period of time. He chose to commit an act of hatred and violence, intended to terrorize and kill. He succeeded.

“Why?!” was the cry from among us. “How could one person hate so deeply and fear so strongly?” Immediately, many of us thought of the Charleston massacre just one year ago at Mother Emanuel Church and the racist hatred acted out against innocent people in their own house of worship. We went back in our minds to Sandy Hook and the grief and confusion we felt in the aftermath of one who in his mental illness decided to take the lives of children. Our minds have searched for answers all week. How could one man act in such violent homophobic hatred? How many others harbor the same hatred deep in their hearts? It seems impossible

that someone's hatred would lead him to take the lives of so many young and innocent people. And yet . . .

The emotional responses have been many and swift. We have been angry. Angry that someone could do such a horrendous thing. Angry that such fear and hatred still exist toward our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. Angry when politicians seek easy answers that blame the killer's skin color and Muslim heritage and use it as an excuse to discriminate against all Muslims. Angry that the killer was able to buy and use a gun made for violence and destruction, not self-defense. Angry that the killer had never been taught to love himself or to love others who are different from him. Angry that such violence exists in our world.

We have also been grieving. We have grieved the loss of so many young men and women, mostly Latino/a who were full of life and hope and dreams of their future. We have grieved as parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors. We have heard their stories and our hearts have ached for their loss.

We have also been confused. Why? How? What has come of this world? Why does this story keep repeating itself? Why did racist hatred rear its ugly head a year ago? Why did homophobic hatred rear its ugly head this week? Why do we have to live with gun violence? How can people hate each other so much? How is it that so many suffer from mental illness? Why is the LGBTQ community the target of such hatred? How can people not love one another?

All of these emotions come together in our lives as a loud and anguished lament. We cry out, as the psalmist did in Psalms 42 and 43: "My tears have been my food day and night." "My soul is cast down within me." "Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" We feel lost and abandoned by our God, and yet we thirst for God as a deer longs for flowing streams. We long for God and hope in God who is our help and our refuge. The emotions we have felt this week are not at all unlike those the psalmist felt thousands of years ago. Many of us feel like the Psalmist felt—like we are drowning in our grief, confusion and outrage. The psalmist, a poet, of course, captures it in the metaphor of a storm:

“Deep call to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.” The psalmist drowns in grief, anguish and feelings of abandonment. And yet, immediately after this drowning image, the psalmist claims the steadfast love of the Lord by day and the song of the God of life by night.

Like the psalmist, in the midst of our drowning we, too, come back to God. We gather here as this community of faith to find comfort, to seek answers together, and to hear a word from the Lord. Like the psalmist, we ask ourselves, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

Our passage from Luke’s gospel this week finds the disciples despairing and fearful. The winds and the waves have surrounded their boat, and the windstorm threatens to destroy them. They are terrified and certain that they are dying. They call out to Jesus, waking him up from his storm-oblivious nap. In an instant, he is awake and has rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and all becomes calm. “Where is your faith?” Jesus asked the disciples. And they look around amazed and, to be honest, afraid. Who is this, then, that creates such calm in the midst of such chaos? Who is this, indeed?

This story of Jesus calming the winds and the waves is one I have returned to time and again when the metaphorical storms of my life seem to have whipped themselves up into a fury around me. This story comes back to me when the winds and rains are battering me so incessantly that I have lost all perspective. I cannot see clearly and am blinded by my tears and by my fears, by my confusion and by my anger. Try as I might, I cannot stop the storm. The more I try to force the winds to cease and the waves to calm down, the more fiercely they batter me. I yell at Jesus, asleep in my boat, in the same way the disciples yell at him: “I am in trouble here! Rescue me!”

And when I finally stop all my fighting and wrestling and put my trust in God, that is when the winds cease, the storm dissipates, and the calm settles around me. My head clears, and suddenly I can see the way forward. I am no longer afraid. I am no longer overwhelmed.

Friends, we have been in our own significant storm this week. I daresay ours is nowhere near as significant as those who witnessed the Sunday morning massacre, or those who are now grieving the loss of someone they loved. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer, this storm has been more difficult for you as well. Your very existence has once again been attacked as our LGBTQ sisters and brothers have been murdered because of their identity. Of course, this leads to significant levels of anger and fear. The storm has been raging in many of us this week.

As Christians, we know how wrong this man was. We know that we are called to the rule of love, that we are called to love our brothers and sisters just as God loves us. Our great teacher is Jesus, who opened doors that had been closed, who welcomed and ate with people many considered to be outcasts, unclean, or unworthy. Jesus taught us to love as God loves us—unconditionally, excessively, lavishly, unselfishly. Jesus suffered and died in his own great love for us, and by God’s power was raised and defeated death that death would not have the final say. We have heard Paul’s words to the early Christian community in Galatia that in Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. And I believe we have learned the expansive meaning of this statement across the years so that it speaks out even more clearly to us today as people of the gospel: That in Christ there is neither black or white, homosexual or heterosexual, male or female or transgender, there is neither rich or poor, Latino or Asian, old or young. In Christ there is no east or west, no south or north, no urban or rural, no rap or classical, no Republican or Democrat, no in or out, no fence or gate, no Muslim or Hindu, no Presbyterian or Roman Catholic. In Christ we are one. We are one. We are one. We are in the boat of life together and we are all CHILDREN OF GOD. We have the same name—Child of God!

What is your name? *Child of God.*

What is my name? *Child of God.*

What was the name of each of the 49 individuals who lost their lives on Sunday morning? *Child of God!*

Why is it we grieve then? Because we are they. Because they are we. Because we are all God's children. We are one.

Part of my deep grief this week lies in the fact that not everyone believes that we are *all* children of God. Too many believe that some are in and many are out. Too many want to build fences and walls, or add rules and regulations to keep the “bad guys” out. And depending on the year and the location and who is in power, the “bad guys” will be defined differently, usually because of their “otherness.” In one place and time, the Jews were labeled the bad guys. In another place and time, black South Africans were labeled as such. In another place and time, the Japanese were the bad guys, in another, the Koreans, in another, the Germans, in another, the African slaves, in another, the Irish, in another, Native Americans, in another, the Vietnamese, in another and still today, African-Americans and people of color, in another and still today, Muslims, Mexicans, and non-white immigrant populations, in another and still today, our LGBTQ sisters and brothers.

The winds and waves of discrimination and hatred of the “other” rock our boats, and rock the boats of many other faithful followers of Jesus. We must cry out, “Help us! We cannot right this boat on our own. We cannot calm the waves around us. We are perishing. We need you.”

When we truly cry out in such utter dependence upon Jesus, therein lies our faith. When we truly cry out in such utter dependence upon Jesus, therein lies our desire to follow him. And follow him we will, with a calm assurance that we can teach love, that we can enact love, that we can live out Jesus' love in such a way that every single day more and more people understand themselves to be loved and cherished children of God. These walls do not enclose a place of judgment. These voices of ours do not speak of exclusion. These songs we sing do not echo chaos, but comfort. These words of Jesus do not encourage violence, but peace. This community of faith is not one of despair, but hope. This gospel is not one of hatred. This gospel is a gospel of love. We are people of love. This one act of hatred, as horrible as it was, will not destroy us. It will not stifle the message that God has given us to share with the world, that all are loved, that all are forgiven, that all are worthy, that all are included in this family of faith. We know our names.

Who are we? *Children of God.*

Who were the people killed this week? *Children of God.*

What is your name? *Child of God.*

Exactly. Now get out there and tell the world what you have heard and seen in Jesus. And tell everyone you meet their name. What is it? Child of God. Child of God. Child of God.

Glory be to God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.