

364 days ago, I climbed into this pulpit, just days after the shootings at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston. After I preached, I thought, “I hope I never have to do that again.” And, here I am, again, in this pulpit, after another mass shooting. The evil that happened in Orlando is the largest mass shooting event to date in America. I say “to date” because I don’t think it will be our last.

49 people killed. 49 lives lost. Countless hopes and dreams silenced amidst the thump-thump-thump of a dance club floor. It boggles the mind. It’s almost too much to take in. Last Sunday, I was in shock at the magnitude of the killings. The shock gave way to grief. Grief at lives lost and families mourning, of investigators moving in the Pulse, with the sounds of cell phones ringing in the pockets of the dead. Phones that would never be answered to tell loved ones, “I’m okay. I’m alive”. And then came anger. Anger that this happened again. Anger that we are having this conversation again. Anger that there is one less safe space in the world. And then fear. If this could happen in Orlando, it can happen anywhere. As a gay man, attempting to live my life openly, with pride and integrity, the thought hit me: is there a target on my back now? Am I next? Maybe others here felt that as well.

The spirituality I practice tells me that I must accept the things I cannot change and that I find the courage to change the things I can. I can’t change the fact that the killings in Orlando happened. I have no answers for this evil. But, I believe that we can change the world. If you are looking for ways to respond to this evil and the change the world around you, I offer you the following suggestions.

This is a good start, as we gather in prayer and meditation to engage with the Holy. Residing in the heart and mind of the Divine allows us to center ourselves. We can practice peace in our own lives. Then we can bring peace to the world.

We will need to find the courage to walk through this grief and pain so that we can get to the other side. The psalmist tells us that, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” On the other side is forgiveness and love.

Some here may not be ready to hear about forgiveness. Some may be too angry to forgive. But, if we hold onto hate or resentment or anger, then evil wins. Love withers. Our hearts turn dark. If you find it too difficult to forgive this perpetrator of evil, then start smaller. Begin healing by forgiving that person that cut you off in traffic as you drove here. Forgive those who tap dance on your last nerve. Forgive the ones that have broken your heart. Let go of the anger that lives in the deep recesses of your soul and let love flood in.

This is easier said than done. I know. But it can be done. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was gunned down in Memphis, spent his life fighting for justice and equality. In his famous Christmas Eve Sermon for Peace King said, “We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will but we will still love you.” King knew his moments of anger and grief, as he fought against the deadly night riders and the vicious racists down in Alabama. And still he loved. Because Jesus taught him to love. “Love your neighbor as yourself”, Jesus says. “Love your enemies.” “Love those that persecute you”.

Historically, the church has not been good at proclaiming God’s love to the GLBTQ community. There are still men today (and aren’t they always men) who speak for the God of Love with lips dripping with hate. So, let me be clear to everyone present today and to anyone who has had the Bible used as a weapon against you: this God who created you in God’s image, this God who breathed life into you, this God who weeps for the dead and injured in Orlando...this God loves you. And there is nothing that you can do to make God love you anymore and there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less. God. Loves. You.

With love, comes hope. And we need hope now. We have made huge strides in equality and equal rights. And, then, like a needle pulled across a record, Orlando. So we need hope. Hope that tomorrow will be better.

Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in America, was also killed by a gunman. Harvey had a stump speech that he gave. People call it the Hope Speech. In it, he said, “And the young gay people in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias and the Richmond, Minnesotas who are coming out and hear Anita Bryant on television and her story. The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up....., you have to give people hope.” Harvey’s word still ring true today.

Finally, get busy. These hands, your hands and my hands, are the only hands God has to use in this world. These are the hands that will write the letters, demanding better access to mental health care and sensible gun regulations. These are the hands that will hold the signs and wave the flags to let people know we are not afraid! We will not hide! We will live openly and proudly. These are the hands that will comfort and support each other, and dry the tears when the next senseless shooting happens. And these are the hands that will build on our past and make progress for our future.

Perhaps like some of you, I’m still grieving and I’m still angry. And I’m hopeful. Hopeful for a better world for my nieces and nephews and for their children, and their children’s children. We have all seen too much hate to respond with more hate. We have seen too much death and violence. Instead of accepting this as the new normal, we can show the world a different way. We can be the change we want to see. And it can start here, today. When you leave this place, I invite you to carry these words with you: Love fully. Forgive freely. Hope extravagantly. And get busy. Amen.