

SANCTUARY

June 19th, 2016

A Response to the Attack in Orlando
By Rev. Dr. Katy E. Valentine

Will you start off in prayer with me today. We are praying that we become the living sanctuaries that God would have us be. We give thanks for the life of Erma Orendorff, who was a living sanctuary for our church, and who is now in everlasting life with her Creator. *Other prayers.*

Thank you for joining me in prayer today. It's one of those weeks where every living moment is like a prayer. I've walked around all week singing hymns of faith, and those hymns are ones of prayer. They speak the words that I don't have the words to speak. The choir anthem today has the refrain in it: "Come home, come home. Ye who are weary come home...." The choir has been working on this one for a while waiting for the right Sunday to sing it. Little did I know that the week we selected would also be the one-week anniversary of the tragedies in Orlando. "Come home...Come home..."...Home is supposed to be a place where we feel safe. Home is supposed to be a sanctuary.

In the Middle Ages, sanctuaries of churches were "safe zones" where people running from arrest or persecution from the law could hide indefinitely. Even though we don't have legal protection for sanctuaries as a safe place from the law, it is still often respected out of tradition.

When I say the word "sanctuary," what do you think of? Some of us may think of a church sanctuary, where we come to worship and to gather with other Christians. We name other safe places sanctuaries. Within an hour of us in three directions we have sanctuaries for animals; two for horses and one for all farm animals. These sanctuaries are where they can go and live out their years happy and free from abuse.

The Psalm (Psalm 20) that we read today talks about Sanctuary. "May God send you help from the Sanctuary, and give you support from Zion!" The word for "sanctuary" means "holy" or "consecrated". In this Psalm, God's own consecrated and holy place is Zion, or Jerusalem. Help will come from the Temple itself in Jerusalem. The ancient Hebrews believed that the Temple was God's actual dwelling place, where God lived. It was a holy house for the living God.

So let me confess. It's. Been. A. Long. Week. Last Sunday morning when we gathered for worship, things were unraveling at a place across the country. At a club in Orlando, Florida, 49 people had been shot and died in Pulse, a bar. Not just a bar – an LGBT bar. Not just an LGBT bar but one that was having Latin night. By the time the sun came up, not only 49 people but 50 including the shooter Omar Mateen had died.

What do we do with this? I hate to ask the question in this way, but I must: what do we do with this *again*? This isn't the first time such an event has happened in our history in the United States. It is also a year almost to the date of the tragedy in South Carolina at the AME church where during a prayer meeting where 9 people were killed. Clementa, Tywanza, Cynthia, Sharonda, Daniel, DePayne, Susan, Ethel, and Myra. This was also not random – it was a targeted hate crime against African Americans. Last week, fifty people, most Latinx, young, and part of the LGBT community, are now gone. Only 4 were older than me.

The usual debates are raging – over gun control, over motives, over Islam, over religion. It’s hard to take it all in – if you’re like me, you may be a little numb and find this hard to process at all. In fact, last week I snapped into fix it mode – found out the news, get to the congregation, break the news to all of you and take care of my people. On Wednesday I woke up and I was beginning to realize what had happened. I am still reeling from this attack.

This attack is senseless. It is also targeted. And it is targeted against a particular group of people on a particular night. No matter where Christians stand on sexual orientation and gender identity, we stand united that killing people because of who they are is absolutely wrong. No, Pastor Jimenez of Verity Baptist Church in Sacramento – you are wrong. This is not an act that shows the desires of God. This is an act that shows the consequences of sin in our world – that taking a life can be justified in the name of any religion. No, Pastor Jimenez, we at FCC in Chico do not stand with you. We stand with Jesus who told us that love is love is love is love. He said especially to love the people that you don’t like very much. We stand with the 700 other pastors, who got very little press, who oppose this statement. We are grateful to Rev. Jim Peck in Chico who stood up for love on the evening news last week.

Let me give some voice to the fear that has surfaced this week in the wake of the attacks on Pulse last Saturday night.

- From a friend on Facebook (used with permission): Whenever we [redacted] get off a plane in another city or drive to another city, we immediately assess the threat level toward us. If there is any hostile energy, we instinctively police our own behavior and limit physical contact, blending in as much as possible.
- From a LatinX speaker: This attack was years in the making and based off of hundreds and hundreds of years of oppression and violence targeted toward queer and trans people of color. The media will use labels like “terrorism” and other things to get us away from understanding how our culture and institutions like the media, like education, like prisons have actually been complicit in this attack and are complicit in the ways that our bodies are put at risk every single day (<http://www.alternet.org/civil-liberties/watch-trans-and-queer-latinx-leaders-speak-out-after-pulse-killings>).

Let me back up even a little further. I’m going to reach back to my childhood, to the days of disco and then big hair – the 70s and 80s. While I was living in the suburbs unaware that any of this existed, the bar was the central gathering place for many in the LGBT community. When people could not be out at church, at a job or even in their families, the bar *became* a church. It was a place where people could go and be accepted completely for who they were – no hiding. It’s what church is supposed to be here, right – a place where we come, no hiding who we are. We bring all of it. In a way, the bar or the club became a sanctuary for the LGBT community.

Louis A. Ortiz-Fonseca explains: “We find community and sanctuary on the dance floor. As Latino gay men, we teach ourselves to break tradition so that we can take the hand of another man and dance. We do this to keep traditional. This alone continues to provide us space, even if the spaces are borrowed, for us to be and feel safe. This massacre was

another reminder that we can be robbed of these spaces, robbed of our humanity and our lives.”

(Louis A. Ortiz –Fonseca from The Gran Varones as quoted in <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/06/13/481859852/what-queer-latinos-are-saying-about-the-orlando-shooting>).

Christians find meaning and new life day after day, week after week in the life of Jesus Christ. Paul knew the living Christ when he wrote what is now a familiar verse. “Your body is a temple” is how we usually hear it. The verse is used to encourage teenagers to cultivate certain behaviors and develop healthy habits and relationships. I’m not knocking that – those are important. All my teens, please hear me, I am not giving you a get out of jail free card. But what Paul writes is even more than this. So many of us have unhealthy relationships with our own bodies, and we fail to see that *we are sanctuaries of the living God*. We are living carriers of the God’s Spirit. We sometimes shy away from the evangelical idea of accepting Jesus into our hearts – but on this point my evangelical colleagues are right. When we do have Jesus in our hearts, we can’t deny we are beautiful creation of God. For far too long, sexual orientation and gender identity have been used to make people feel that their bodies were *not* living sanctuaries. As an act of faith, I’m going to ask you to do something. Turn to a neighbor. Look at them deeply. And tell them, “Darling, you look fabulous.” Now turn to another neighbor and tell them “You are beautifully made.”

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he does not speak of an actual temple with a physical building. He speaks of *people* who have gotten to know Jesus Christ. Paul recognizes that Jesus can’t be put into a box, or limited to a building, or space or time. Later we’re going to sing the popular church song “Sanctuary.” This song is a favorite at camps and in youth groups – and I have to admit, after singing it for the past 25 years, I’ve kind of had enough. The youth here accuse me, correctly, of singing it too fast – and that’s usually because I want to get through it. But this week, I have been humming it. And it’s different. “Lord prepare me to be sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living sanctuary for you.” The song is based on 1 Cor 3:16-17: “Do you not know that you are God’s sanctuary and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?...For God’s sanctuary is holy, and you are that sanctuary.” How would the world be transformed if we all knew this deep down inside? The people at Pulse last week did know it. Unfortunately, Omar Mateen did not.

I know that some of you have been wondering why the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity has been coming up so much in our society lately. When Jesse and I co-preached together three weeks ago on gender identity and the church, I did not expect to have to bring it up again so explicitly so soon. In the church, we believe that everyone is equal and that God loves all—gay, straight, black, brown, white, married, single. And I believe that is true. We are talking about this again, though, because people’s lives are at risk for being who they are. And Jesus was kind of interested in the most vulnerable people in his day. And what Orlando reminds us is that the LGBT community continues to be vulnerable. When I put on Facebook that I would be preaching about Orlando today, my friend and colleague Sam White Swan-Perkins wrote and said: “Not just on Sundays, but everyday, because we are dying out here. Really.” So I’m talking about it now.

So, all of you living sanctuaries, what comes next? Let me give you some options in the face of what seems overwhelming. I know you've been praying – don't stop. Through prayer, we become transformed, and we are empowered to transform the world. Don't ever stop. In a moment we will light some candles to remember the lives of those who were lost. It is an act of prayer. Every time you dance, it is an act of prayer. When you don't have words, pray with your breath. I also invite you to show up – again whether you are straight, gay, queer, cis, trans – show up to places where LGBT and other marginalized people are – just showing up and not even saying anything is important. Today from 3-5, Stonewall Alliance has invited the community to come and process the Orlando attacks. God also calls us, this very church, to be a sanctuary and a safe place.

We are also hosting Vacation Bible School in July. I know this is a far cry from Orlando. I hope so. But it is an act of grace for us to hold hope wherever we can. Christians are called to express the joy of the living and risen God always. Holding a safe week for the children of Chico is one way to do that. (*Pull out toilet paper/paper towel rolls*). Bringing more of these week after week is a way to show your commitment to having a safe haven for our children. Some of you remember the sermon I preached in December when I called upon you to reach out to our children and youth. I spoke about Mr. Martin, my Sunday School teacher for 10 years – this is your chance to become a Mr. Martin for one of these kids. And one of those children will one day grow up and say, "There's no conflict for me in being straight, gay, lesbian, transgender, or any other way that God created me, because *I* went to a church that loved me and accepted me for who I was when I was a child."

What does God think about all this? I do not know – I am not God. I'll tell you what I believe. I believe that God weeps. I believe that God knows intimately what it is like to lose someone far too young since Jesus died a senseless death at the hands of the Roman Empire. I believe that God gives us the spark of hope and invites us to share that with the world. I believe that God has given us the ability to provide a sanctuary for the community in Chico.

We are going to move into our time of prayer together. This week we are going to read the names of the victims of the attacks. You are invited to come forward and light candles as Joe and I read the names of the victims in the Orlando attacks. Each candle will be a prayer.

Katy

Joe

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

Yilmery 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

Omar Mateen, 29 years old