

“Orlando”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins
to the congregation at
Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

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Scripture: Luke 8: 22- 39

Sitting here in my backyard in the early morning, as the purple delphiniums reach for heaven, and the red-capped house finch sings praise to the day, it's hard to believe that anything could be wrong with the world.

But today, the beauty and stillness around me seem almost cruel. This peacefulness, so immediate and so simple, only makes the idea of peace for the world seem more achingly, maddeningly out of reach. The morning whispers: “Here's what the world could be, should be. But unless something changes, may never be.”

The devastating events of this past week leave me once again with unanswerable questions about the human heart and its capacity for good...and for evil. Orlando will now take its place in the lexicon of heartbreak. Like Columbine or Sandy Hook, that single word - Orlando - is now and forever so much more than geography. It is now and forever the faces of 49, mostly young, LGBT men and women who will never enjoy the simple pleasure of sitting in a backyard like this.

It is now and forever the shattered hearts of their parents and their friends who will live the rest of their lives trying not to hate this world and what it can do. Orlando - now and forever a reminder that we have failed in some fundamental way - a failure of will, perhaps. A failure of community, maybe. A failure of goodness.

Is it also, I wonder, a failure of God? I know better than to ask it, but this morning I can't help myself. And I know the answer I learned in seminary, the answer I believe, most days, is that God is not a puppeteer; that we have free will; that this is how it must be.

But if not a failure to intervene, then is it not at least, for God, a failure of design? If I'm to give glory to God for the delphinium, then should I not also then be able to scream *WHY?* Why, O God, is the capacity to imagine such cruelty even possible? Why must there be so much senseless loss in this life?

I know, of course, that I must take my place at the back of the line with such questions – behind the psalmist, who stands behind Job, who stands behind Jesus, crying, “Why, O God, why have you forsaken me?” as he dies on a cross.

And there it is – the cross. All the suffering and sadness of the world is there in the mystery and magnitude of that cross. God, I want to run from it sometimes! I don’t want a religion whose central metaphor is an instrument of death. I don’t want to follow someone who’s walking into a tomb.

I want to worship here in my backyard – the birdbath can be my baptismal font, the maple tree my church steeple - here where everything is peaceful and beautiful and right.

But everything isn’t peaceful, or beautiful, or right. Not for so many people in this world. Not in so many places in this world where poverty and violence strip people’s lives of joy and promise. Not really even here in my own heart, so full as I am of my own inner violence and ugliness.

And so long as this is so; so long as the world must be this way... then give me the cross. Give me a faith that is honest; that names the truth of this world. Because to name it is the first step in being unafraid of it. And to be unafraid of it is the first step in maybe, someday, together, changing it.

I’m thinking now of our scripture text for this Sunday, when Jesus and the disciples go across the sea to the land of the Gerasenes. The symbolism is hard to miss. First, there’s the sea itself – mysterious, powerful, dangerous. A windstorm almost drowns them along the way.

And there’s the decision to go in the first place. “Let us go to the other side of the lake,” says Jesus, as if deciding on a nice spot for a picnic. Except where they’re going is no picnic. They leave the safety and security of the Jewish territory of Galilee and go to Gerasene, a land of Gentiles; a place no self-respecting Rabbi would take his students.

And then, “*as he stepped out on land*”, the moment they arrive, the madness of the world finds him. One foot still in the boat, the suffering of the world - naked and filthy and crazed - sets upon him. I wonder, if for a moment, did he regret the decision? Did he think how easy it would be to just step back in, and return to the other shore?

“What’s your name?” Jesus asks the man. And in one of the saddest lines in scripture, the man doesn’t know. He has forgotten who he is. “Legion” he says, for we are many.

Yes, the demons are many. And, yes, we have forgotten who we are.

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” cries the man. What, indeed, does this Jesus want with us? This Jesus, who says ‘come with me’ – *across* the lake; *through* the storm; *toward* the madness and the suffering and the pain of the world. This Jesus and his foolhardy insistence that pain and death will not win the day; that beyond the suffering, through the tragedy, on the other side of the cross, life will rise again. Life *will* rise again.

That terrible night in Orlando has evoked, as it should, a barrage of questions about why it happened and what should be done about it. Is what happened there about gun control? Is it about mental illness? Is it about homophobia? Or world politics? Yes. Yes. Yes.

But this morning as I sit here, it's clear that it's also about something more. What happened in Orlando was a failure, not of God, but of the one and only thing that ever really matters. It was a failure to love.

The overwhelming failure to love that became Omar Mateen was a failure of his, of the community that surrounded him, and a failure of public decency and tolerance that has become far too acceptable - on the airwaves of talk radio, from the tweets of politicians, and in the pulpits of too many churches.

These failures to love and the hatred that seeps into the gaps they leave, take time to grow. Hatred builds slowly, but powerfully. And we don't see it coming, until we do. Until savagely it crashes through our well-meaning but mostly self-centered lives, and we wonder, naively, how in the world this could have happened.

But if hatred grows slowly and powerfully, so too does love. For every example of cowardice, bigotry, and cruelty that leads to an Omar Mateen, there are countless acts of generosity, compassion and kindness that stand as testament and witness to what this world *can* be like. To what this world *is* like so much of the time.

We largely take it for granted that the vast majority of people, the vast majority of the time...choose peace. It's important, after such a tragedy, that we remember this.

Last week the darkness we call hate temporarily raised its ugly head and broke our hearts. But as soon as it saw the courage of the first responders, and the coming together of that city, and the outpouring of love from around the world, it quickly slithered back into its dark hole.

The demons are legion, it's true. But they are nothing compared to the numbers and strength of the love-bearers and the hope-givers and the wound-healers of this world.

The tears of our grief, the outpouring of our help, and the righteousness of our anger *should* and *do* make the demons tremble. They know they are outnumbered. They know they cannot win.

Such hatred may stun us; may even frighten us for a moment. But it will not keep us from the work of love. We will not be cowed into staying on the safety of our own shore. We will continue to go *toward* the suffering and the madness of this world, and we will not be afraid.

For even now this morning, I have rested here on this porch long enough. The day has grown warm. The house finch has gone quiet. The delphiniums need a drink. And I can hear Jesus calling from the boat:

*Our work is love and there is work to be done.
Our work is love and there is work to be done.
Let us be off now – to the other side of the lake.*