

***Love Emancipates Us*** by Rev. Doug McCusker

Before I say anything about the horrific events that transpired at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida last Sunday morning, I would like to recognize the human beings who were slain while dancing and expressing their joy of life. Listen very closely as I read their names and ages. Sit comfortably in your seat. If closing your eyes helps you focus on the person associated with these names do that.

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

I'm sure that no matter how hard you concentrated, at some point the names started to blur into sounds. It is almost impossible to hold that many souls in our hearts, one right after the other. And I didn't even include the 53 people who were wounded and maimed, the survivors who witnessed the horror, the first responders and law enforcement personnel who arrived on the scene, the families and friends who lost their loved ones, the Latino and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer communities of Orlando, which were deeply impacted by this violent attack against their own.

The ripple goes out far and wide. And it includes us, people who didn't even know them, but who stand in solidarity with them as our human kinfolk. We feel a deep sense of loss. I tried reading stories about their lives and it was too hard. I had to put the paper down and just sit with the sorrow.

The vast majority of the victims were young adults out on a Saturday night having a good time. Most of them were Latinos because it was Latin night at the gay club. A place where they felt alive and safe; their oasis from the white, straight culture of their everyday lives.

Let us never forget that in all these mass shootings, no matter what the motivation is for perpetrating these crimes against humanity, all of the lives that were lost were sacred. Every one of them. And this is probably the hardest thing for us to accept; even the killer's life had inherent worth and dignity. Not his actions, but his life. His name as you all know was Omar Mateen.

His last actions were filled with hate. What he did was inexcusable. He was unable to see the people in the club as his brothers and sisters. He was adrift, separated in his twisted mind from the interdependent web of life of which he was a part. His actions were despicable, but his life was sacred.

A year ago in Charleston, South Carolina, 11 people were murdered in similar fashion at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church after a Wednesday night bible study. The nation mourned and for a while, we did a lot of soul searching. Confederate flags

were taken down and we even engaged in a conversation about the legacy of racial hatred in our country. But to me, the most amazing thing that happened was that the families immediately forgave the suspected killer, Dylan Roof.

They knew that to harbor hatred in their hearts would destroy them. So the best way to honor their fallen loved ones was to reach out to the killer with love; to witness to the network of mutuality. As Martin Luther King teaches us, "hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that." And yet, that is an amazingly difficult thing to do, especially after someone has taken the life of someone you know and love.

On Monday night, the late night television comedians were just like most of us. They were somber, angry and frustrated at the seemingly endless loop of mass violence in our culture. On TBS Samantha Bee expressed barely suppressed rage. She said:

"Well, here we are. Now, after a massacre, the standard operating procedure is that you stand onstage and deliver some well-meaning words about how we will get through this together, how love wins, how love conquers hate. And that is great. That is beautiful. But you know what? I am too angry for that! Love does not win, unless we start loving each other enough to fix our problems."

Today is June 19<sup>th</sup>, the day that we celebrate the end of slavery in the United States. It marks the emancipation of the last group of African Americans who were still enslaved by white people in Galveston, Texas 2 months after the end of the Civil War. This weekend, there have been Juneteenth events all over the country. Yesterday, I accompanied our Adult and Hand Chimes choirs as they performed for the second year in a row in the Juneteenth Celebration at the New City Fellowship here in Fredericksburg. It was great. It was joyous.

Juneteenth is a celebration of emancipation from bondage and a reclaiming of the natural freedom that signifies the inherent worth and dignity of all people. It also is a celebration of the emancipation of our nation from the evil institution of slavery that gripped us in its insidious embrace.

From the inception of our nation we were divided over the issue of slavery. The original framers of the constitution debated long into the nights to solve the unsolvable contradiction of legalized slavery with freedom. This was the first great test of the moral courage of our nation and we failed. Language was inserted into the Bill of Rights that counted enslaved black people as 3/5 of a person so slave holding states could use them for seats in Congress without granting them citizenship.

The Second Amendment that codified the right to bear arms was proposed by Southern delegates like George Mason to ensure that the militias, which served

as slave patrols in the south, would not have their weapons taken away by the Federal Government.

Numerous laws and compromises were enacted over the next 60 years that perpetuated slavery into some of the frontier states. These were temporary solutions for the insolvable; ways to placate our collective bondage to an immoral and economically addictive situation. The longer it went on, the higher the price we would have to pay to free the nation from slavery.

Ultimately, it would take a bloody civil war to make it happen. Roughly 620,000 Americans died in that war. Try to wrap your head around 620,000 lives that had to perish in order for this nation to fix that problem. Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who was an infantry soldier in that war, called it the wrong thing for the right reason. We didn't fix the deeper root problem of white supremacy and racism, but we abolished one of its most heinous forms of oppression.

As a nation, we continue to be enslaved by hate, fear and injustice. Expressions of this enslavement in our history include the genocide of native people, lynching of Black people, banning of Chinese immigrants, internment of Japanese Americans and the mass expulsion of Mexicans in the 1950's. As Martin Luther King said: "There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted."

If we are not maladjusted to the modern expressions of hate, fear and injustice, then we remain enslaved by them. The massacre in Orlando struck at the intersection of the chains that hold us down: homophobia, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass lethality.

These mass shootings are horrendous. But after every one of these, we seem to be unable to grieve as a nation without arguing over who is to blame. Inevitably we retreat to our respective corners and hurl insults back and forth. Meanwhile, our chains of enslavement to hate, fear and injustice get tighter and tighter.

We have found ourselves in an untenable position where we are unable to enact reasonable gun control legislation. We can't even have a reasonable conversation about it. One of my colleagues this week was set to speak at a vigil after the shooting. She shared on Facebook that a group of people publicly announced that they would protest the vigil with their AK47's. She was asked not to include any remarks about gun control for the safety of those in attendance.

Modern guns are incredibly lethal objects that when used irresponsibly or maliciously wreak havoc on our social fabric. In the name of liberty, and of course in the spirit of capitalism, we have allowed easy access to higher and higher forms of lethality with a minimum of control. It's true, assault rifles and high capacity magazines don't cause mass shootings. Hate and fear does that. But

when you put the two together, you enable mass shootings just like gasoline enables an inferno.

Samantha Bee is right! “Love does not win, unless we start loving each other enough to fix our problems.” But how can we love, truly love if we can’t even communicate, grieve, or see each other as human beings?

I refuse to accept that hate and fear are our default positions as human beings. We teach each other that behavior and we can interrupt it just the same. We will never rid the world of hate or fear, but that’s not the point. Some haters are going to continue to hate. We need to interrupt it, redirect it and refocus our communities and ourselves toward the overwhelming love that is already here.

Hate and fear are bred in places where people are ignored, alienated separated and abused. But it is awfully hard for people to hate each other when they listen to their stories and begin to understand each other.

For every ugly speech or hate filled reaction to the shootings, there have been many more scenes of love and solidarity at the personal level. Communities getting together, celebrating their common humanity and common destinies. That is what it is all about. That is the only way that we can ever expect to find the common good.

I have preached before and I will continue to preach that salvation is not an individual achievement. It is a communal exercise. Salvation is not about finding peace in the next life, but finding peace here in this life. Salvation is the slow, steady, struggle for emancipation from fear, hate and injustice.

We must be maladjusted to everything that feeds and enables slavery of the human spirit: blind righteousness, fear of the other, greed, and lust for superiority. These are the things that cannot abide when we love. When we remove the space in between us as humans, we are freed.

How many times in the course of this week did you notice that happen? How many times did you enable love to break the shackles that incarcerate your heart? I’ll bet it happened way more times than you can imagine or else you wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

Start to attune your attention to acts of love and expressions of compassion. Listen with your whole being. Concentrate on your mutuality and interdependence with the other person’s life. Seek out opportunities to do this across the borders that separate our communities. When you do, it will fill you with love; the kind of love that emancipates us.