

“Give light to my eyes...” – Galatians 3:23-29; Psalm 13 (June 19, 2016)
ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING

“Give light to my eyes, O God.”

“Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed,’

lest my foes rejoice when I fall.”

Give light to our eyes, O God.

During my days spent in training at the fire department, we often studied historic fires that initiated new protocols for public safety and emergency response. My fire house was located in Western Massachusetts and so one of the first fires we studied was the Cocoanut Grove fire, which happened in the city of Boston in 1942.

Cocoanut Grove was a premier nightclub in downtown Boston. On the night of November 28, the managers of the club decorated the bar and performance area with fake palm trees made out of various materials. Unfortunately, the materials, and the paint used to cover them, were highly flammable. When one of the trees caught fire that night, the flames spread

quickly, and Cocoanut Grove was almost immediately – to use a fire fighting term – fully engulfed.

The result was catastrophic. As fires go, the death toll was the second highest in the nation's history at the time.

Cocoanut Grove was filled beyond capacity that night, and the number of people clambering for exits created a carnal confusion in the club. The spreading flames and the noxious gases from the burning decorations had their own ill effects.

A serious recipe for disaster. But, there was another, more sinister problem in the building. There was no way to escape. The owners had been concerned that some customers might leave through the alley without paying their tab. In order to prevent this, they chained doors closed; some exit doors only opened inward to slow egress; and at least one back door had been covered over with mortar and bricks. The easiest way out was a single revolving door that would only allow two people to exit at a time. The patrons – the victims – were trapped.

After investigating the tragedy, authorities admitted that fire in public buildings can lead to tragic death, yes. People still die by fire and smoke inhalation today. They also recognized that the sheer magnitude of the death *toll* could have been reduced with some common sense regulations.

In the aftermath of the Cocoanut Grove fire, there was universal reform. New regulations, laws, and legislation were introduced in Massachusetts and these eventually swept across the nation.

If you walk around our own church – this building – you will find evidence of the lasting reforms that came out of the fire in Cocoanut Grove. Exit doors that only open by swinging toward the outside of the building; panic bars on doors so they can be opened from the inside, even when they're locked. In other buildings around Seattle you'll see revolving doors that still have two outward-swinging doors to either side to allow easier egress.

The location: Boston, Massachusetts.

The time: November 28, 1942.

The venue: A nightclub.

The outcome: Tragic death that was – at least in part – preventable.

The response: sweeping changes that affected, and continue to affect every public building in the nation fifty-eight years later in order to protect innocent human lives.

Give light to our eyes, O God...

The location: Orlando, Florida.

The time: June 12, 2016.

The venue: A nightclub.

The outcome: Tragic death that was – we must believe somehow – preventable.

The response: [...]

“Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed,’

lest my foes rejoice when I fall.”

Give light to our eyes, O God.

I can say with conviction that nothing like this can ever happen again.

I cannot say with conviction that nothing like this *will* ever happen again.

What is our response?

The response – the changes to which I refer have nothing to do with egress or fire prevention.

Give light to our eyes.

December 2, 2015: Inland Regional Center, San Bernardino, California.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

November 29, 2015: Planned Parenthood, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

October 1, 2015: Umpqua Community College, Roseburg, Oregon.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

July 16, 2015: Marine training facility, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

June 17, 2015: Emanuel AME Church. Charleston, South Carolina.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

Isla Vista, California; Fort Hood, Texas; Washington, D.C.; Santa Monica, California; Newtown, Connecticut...

Enough.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

Following these tragedies, some media outlets attempt to pit one population against another; to make blanket statements about people, and cultures, religions, disabilities.

Enough.

Give light to our eyes.

Love sees through these deceptive mechanizations. God's love sees through the quiet pervasive shadows of hate that creep out from our blue-lit screens and beckon to us in the temptation to blame, the temptation to accuse, the temptation to hate, the temptation to strike back.

Enough.

At some point we have to have a conversation... Not a dead end conversation over social media using Facebook or Twitter. A real conversation.

There's no way for me to say, and for you to believe, that I'm not advocating for every firearm in the nation to be taken away, except to say that I'm not. But can't we – for the love of God and everything Holy (and I do mean that) – for the love of God and all creation, can't we have a conversation about assault style weapons that are designed to take the highest number of *human* lives in the most efficient way possible? Can't we talk about that?

Isn't there something in the Bible about taking swords and beating them into plowshares? About taking assault weapons and bending them into the pipes that will carry potable water to communities on the margins? About taking AR-15's meant to cut humans – humanity – down and beating those weapons into pruning shears meant, instead, to cut dead growth from fruit trees to feed the hungry and build humanity back up?

Can't we come together and hold a sacred conversation? I'd like to think that if this conversation is going to be modeled anywhere, then it would be in the church. The problem is that history shows us – by the

sheer numbers of denominations in our faith tradition – that we Christians have a sad history of multiplying by division.

This father's day, my parents are visiting from Maine and my dad is here in the congregation. I remember my early childhood in Philadelphia when he wouldn't allow me to bring toy guns into the house; he didn't want them to become commonplace in the way I thought about the world. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Just like I don't think there's anything wrong with parents who teach their daughters and sons to hunt in order to put food on their tables...

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The passage from Galatians reminds us we are all one in Christ Jesus. "Each one of you...a child of God. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek... no slave or free... no male or female... All are one in Christ Jesus."

This passage from today's lectionary is also a rallying cry for LGBTQ Christians, as the conversation about full inclusion continues at both the denominational and local church level.

If we all uphold this oneness – if we look to Jesus as the example – perhaps we can sit down and show the world how to have compassionate conversations in the midst of utter chaos. If we uphold this oneness, perhaps we can rebuke the dark forces that desire, crave, and finally rejoice in our opposition and infighting.

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It wasn't read, but you might recognize the lectionary passage from the gospels for today. It's the passage about Jesus meeting a man possessed by a demon named "Legion."

As I read this passage in light of this week's events, I couldn't figure out why those who created the lectionary thought these passages about the oneness of Christ and the demon named Legion belonged together, but maybe sitting out in the pews you see where this is going. On Wednesday I read a reflection written by Nick Carter, who, some of you might remember, preached here for my installation six years ago, and is currently the interim president of the American Baptist Seminary of the West (where Pastor Tim is a member of the board of directors).

Nick writes (and I quote):

“Hatred is not new to America. Indeed, the scars of hate cannot be hidden. They mark the most shameful chapters in our history and they are legion. One cannot tell the story of minorities here without an agonizing recitation of prejudice, lies, exclusion, hurt and violence. It was only through a long struggle for the soul of our country, more often than not led by prophetic members of the faith community, that justice and some degree of reconciliation was won... It wasn't easy and some of the greatest struggles were within the religious community itself, but if there is any claim to moral character and Christian honor it was earned by those courageous few who dared to cast out the demons of hate... [Legion].” (End quote)

We are called to honor the difference and diversity in our Christian life. In I Corinthians Paul asks, “If all the parts were the same, how could there be one whole body?” In this diversity we find the oneness of a healthy body, a holistic spiritual system.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

We must make sacred our unity in Christ, lest we fall prey to the demons of division – for they are many.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

We cannot succumb to bitter dispute, but instead enter into loving dialogue in order to discern the path of peace.

Give light to our eyes, O God.

Honoring our diversity, we can begin by saying to one another, “I love you.”

Give light to our eyes, O God.

And while we walk together, mourning the deaths at Pulse Nightclub, and continuing to remember those killed at Emanuel AME, we proclaim loudly to all who listen, and perhaps especially to those who aren't listening yet: We fully embrace our LGBTQ children; Black Lives Matter; we cherish our Latino and Latina siblings; we love our Muslim neighbors.

Give light to our eyes.

And as we lift our own voices, may we also *hear* the voices of ***Diverse*** Harmony that have been echoing around this sanctuary since Wednesday night's service of remembrance:

“I see your true colors

shining through.

I see your true colors

And that's why I love you.

So, don't be afraid...

To let them show

True colors. True colors.

You're beautiful..."

If you hear the voice of the holy coming from the mouths of these queer and ally children in that sacred moment... If you hear God's voice escaping their lips as they express their genuine unity... Do not harden your hearts.