

## Reflection

A Service of Remembrance, Action and Hope

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Love and peace to all of you. My name is Michelle, I'm 26 years old. I'm a musician and a queer woman. I am humbled to be speaking here today. I serve as the organist here at Seattle First Baptist Church and I play the piano for Diverse Harmony, a queer-straight alliance youth choir which also rehearses here. I was born and raised in Central Florida and went to college in a small town about 30 minutes north of Orlando. On weekends, friends and I would sometimes drive into the city. Most of my friends were also students in the school of music and many were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Pulse must have been the first gay nightclub I ever attended and I have many bittersweet memories of timidly sipping drinks on the back patio, amazed by how freely others were dancing, often too shy to join in myself. New to the scene, I had never seen that kind of dancing before – that totally liberated, wonderful, ridiculous form of human expression. You don't often see that kind of dancing in straight nightclubs. You must understand that for many, that was their sanctuary and the only place they felt free.

Many news accounts refer to Pulse as a gay nightclub in Orlando, but in my experience that isn't entirely accurate. It was THE gay nightclub. The ONLY stable gay nightclub in the area, at least when I lived there a few years ago.

Sometimes in Seattle we forget about how incredibly lucky we are to have a relatively large, thriving LGBTQ community here with many resources, events, organizations, establishments and the support of local elected officials. In Central Florida and I assume in many other parts of this country, that is simply not the case. There are much fewer resources, much fewer safe and affirming places for LGBTQ people. Pulse was often the only place for us to party safely when I lived there.

Pulse is not downtown and it's not on a street like Pike or Pine in a place like Capitol Hill. It's on a busy 4-lane street across from a Radioshack, a Wendy's, an auto body shop, and other urban sprawl. There were no rainbow flags decorating the street and no stickers posted in store windows identifying them as Safe Places because no street in Orlando looked like that.

Growing up in Florida, I am also aware - to a small degree - of the level of racism against the Latino and Latina population. Florida has a substantial Latin-American community that our state's economy depends on. It contributes to the cultural richness of our state

and makes up part of the melting pot we proudly claim to be as a country. I speak, of course, as a privileged white person who never had this kind of racism directed at me personally. I remember as a child overhearing the way people talked about this ethnic minority. I remember the kind of language people used to put them down in subtle ways or in blatant declarations of hatred.

What happened Sunday was an intentional attack on a very specific population - a Latin night at a gay bar is an attack on a very specific minority population.

I am now 2 degrees of separation away from people who lost loved ones this past Sunday. If this had happened a few years ago there would have been a very high chance that friends of mine or I would have been there. I never thought I would have personal connection to something like this, but I guess you never know when the next nightclub, movie theater, university, church, elementary school, etc. will be targeted. I do know that one of the definitions of stupidity is to make no change and expect a different outcome. I do know that the vast majority of these shooters are straight, cis-gender, mostly white, American, angry men with a history of violence who legally purchased weapons capable of killing dozens of people in seconds. I also know that most of the laws in this country are made by straight, cis-gender, white, often angry men.

I see many news reports which are twisting this story to promote more hate. To pit one minority population against another. Muslim brothers and sisters, I stand with you in solidarity and against this promotion of hatred. America, this blood is on our hands. We promote the ideology of fear and then provide the weapons to kill each other.

I hope we can all agree that domestic violence, dangerous and untreated forms of mental illness, terrorism, homophobia, racism, transphobia, xenophobia, everything from suicidal thoughts to road rage is much, much more dangerous with easy access to assault-grade weapons. These guns are not made of self defense. These guns are not made for hunting or target practice. These guns are made specifically for killing the most amount of people with the least amount of effort. 13 bullets per second. There are 9 million AR-15s in circulation and they can be bought by any angry person who may have multiple FBI investigations and histories of assault, with no license, waiting period, training, or questioning. (This is the most popular weapon for mass shootings and the company which produces it is doing very well, by the way. I read an article today about how their stocks have skyrocketed and they're expanding their business.) We have a mass shooting every 64 days on average. Statistics show that after every mass shooting there is a dramatic increase in gun sales. There are 89 guns for every 100 people in the United States.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the importance of allies, especially during these difficult times. To the thousands of allies who gave blood to the victims when gay men were not allowed to do so themselves. To the allies who educate themselves, who enter into conversation, who recognize the importance of engaging with minority populations. To all the allies who proudly show their support when it's not always popular to do so. Who owe immense gratitude and we hope that we continue to educate so that hatred and bigotry will eventually be an embarrassing admission in history books about the time when for some stupid reason we thought we were better than our neighbor. To all of our friends on Facebook who were so quick to change their profile picture to the French flag after the Paris attacks or to memorialize other events of extreme tragedy and loss of innocent life but who are silent now, we notice your silence. Your silence is deafening.

It is my most sincere hope that we are able to act on our love, to recognize that loving is an action not just an emotion. I join my voice and my heart with the many for whom this tragedy still feels unreal. I mourn with the families of friends of the 49 who were killed. Love and peace to all of you.