

**“THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE,
BUT PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR” (1 JOHN 4:18)**

*Sermon by the Rev. Douglas Clark, June 19, 2016 – 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
First Congregational Church of Haddam – Higganum Congregational Church*

Text: I John 4:7-21, *NRSV*

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.



This past Tuesday, you may recall, was an especially fine late spring/early summer day, with pleasant temperatures and gentle breezes. The cloudless sky was what my Canadian mother loved to call a “Canadian blue” sky.

When I took my morning coffee with me out onto our deck and watched the treetops swaying against the Canadian blue sky, I remembered another equally fine day, a late summer/early autumn day fifteen years ago.

On Tuesday, September 11, fifteen years ago, I was just a few months into my ministry as interim associate pastor at a Presbyterian church in Washington, DC. The senior minister was on sabbatical, and in my role as acting head of staff, I was leading our weekly Tuesday morning staff meeting. It was during this staff meeting that our children's music director got an emergency phone call from her husband, who had heard that an airplane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers in New York. We turned on the TV in the office and slowly became aware of the magnitude of the terrorist attacks we now refer to as 9/11.

I remember the remarkable international outpouring of grief and compassion in the days that followed the unspeakable horrors of September 11. Candlelight vigils. Makeshift memorials at our nation's embassies around the world. I still have a collection of photographs sent to me by a colleague just a few days after 9/11: these photographs are visual proof of the global outrage and grief in solidarity with our nation and our people.

Just one week ago today, on June 12, we slowly became aware of the magnitude of a mass shooting during Latino/Latina night at a gay nightclub, The Pulse, in Orlando, Florida. Some early reports suggested that the shooter, an American citizen whose parents are Afghan immigrants, was acting on behalf of, or in sympathy with, the group calling itself the Islamic State. Later reports have suggested that this mass murderer was motivated at least as much by hateful homophobia as by radical religious ideology.

Throughout this past week, there have been candlelight vigils around the nation and around the world held to remember and honor the victims and survivors of the Orlando massacre. In our particular neck of the woods, candlelight vigils were held on Tuesday at First Congregational Church in Middletown, at the Islamic Association of Greater Hartford mosque in Berlin, and in the fellowship hall of the Higganum Congregational Church.

During the impromptu candlelight vigil at the Higganum church—which happened as a few of us were gathering for a couple of meetings—I read a brief essay by Billy Klutzz, a gay man who is a graduate of Wesley Theological Seminary, where my wife Mary used to teach, and is the evening services coordinator at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in McLean, VA, where I served as interim senior minister from 2003 to 2005. Here are some of Billy Klutzz's words:

“As a Christian, following the horrific news Sunday morning, I did what people of faith do best: I lit candles. A few others sent out tweets, we showed up in Dupont Circle, and we lit more candles.”

“Our ordinary religious rituals,” he continued, “are a spiritual emergency preparedness plan of sorts....Just a few hours after I walked in Saturday's D.C. Pride Parade, Sunday's attack on LGBT people left me disoriented. Amid confusion, I revert to the spiritual version of stop, drop and roll. I do the only thing I can remember how to do. I light candles. I say prayers....And I stand there [with] others lost in the senselessness and sadness.”

On Thursday, President Obama traveled to Orlando to stand with the grieving friends and family members and loved ones of the victims and survivors of this latest mass murder. Thursday marked the fifteenth time in his seven and a half years as our President that he has had to offer condolences after a mass shooting. On these occasions, in the words of New York Times reporter Julie Hirschfeld Davis, the President “grasps for words of sympathy, comfort and condolence and offers long, tight embraces that the mourners will remember far more vividly than his words.”¹

Suffice it to say that not all public figures in our country have responded to this latest mass shooting with the dignity and compassion of President Obama. Perhaps the worst was a so-called Christian pastor in Sacramento CA who urged his congregation to rejoice at the deaths of 49 people at a gay nightclub, and to lament that more people—“pedophiles,” he called them—hadn't been killed.

Thankfully, these kinds of hateful responses to a hate crime have been the exception and not the rule. Several of my Facebook friends have found comfort and sustenance in the biblical verse on the cover of this morning's worship bulletin: There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

I also learned through my Facebook friends about remarks given by Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox of Utah, at a vigil on Monday in Salt Lake City. I quote him at some length. He began his speech “with an admission and an apology.” Here are his words:

“First, I recognize fully that I am a balding, youngish, middle-aged straight, white, male, Republican, politician... with all of the expectations and privileges that come with those labels. I am probably not who you expected to hear from today.

“I'm here because, yesterday morning, 49 Americans were brutally murdered. And it made me sad. And it made me angry. And it made me confused. I'm here because those 49 people were gay. I'm here because it shouldn't matter. But I'm here because it does.

“I am not here to tell you that I know exactly what you are going through. I am not here to tell you that I feel your pain. I don't pretend to know the depths of what you are feeling right now. But I do know what it feels like to be scared. And I do know what it feels like to be sad. And I do know what it feels like to be rejected. And, more importantly, I know what it feels like to be loved.”²

¹Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Relatives of the Victims Feel Obama's Concern in Embrace-Filled Visit,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2016, p. A18.

²<https://www.ksl.com/index.php?sid=40209267&nid=148&title=lt-gov-cox-speaks-at-vigil-for-orlando-my-heart-has-changed>.

You may have heard the story about how the flight crew and passengers on an Orlando-bound JetBlue flight “went out of their way to comfort a grieving woman who lost her 20-year-old grandson in last Sunday's massacre.” Katie Davis Karas, the flight attendant who initiated the compassionate response of crew and passengers by asking them to sign a sympathy card for the grandmother of Luis Omar Ocasio-Capo, described what happened after the plane landed:

As they got off the plane, “every single passenger stopped to personally greet Omar's grandmother.

“Some just said they were sorry, some touched her hand, some hugged her, some cried with her,” Karas wrote. “But every single person stopped to speak to her, and not a single person was impatient at the slower deplaning process.”

“I am moved to tears yet again as I struggle to put our experience into words,” she continued. “In spite of a few hateful, broken human beings in this world who can all too easily legally get their hands on mass assault weapons—people ARE kind. People DO care. And through our [crew and] customers' humanity today,...I am hopeful that someday soon we can rally together to make the world a safer place for all.”³

To echo the words of Katie Davis Karas, I am hopeful today that the Senate filibuster led by Sen. Chris Murphy of CT, and the op-ed by Gen. Stanley McChrystal in Friday's *NY Times*, both in response to our national crisis of gun violence, might actually create a climate for congressional consideration of gun control legislation.

In his *NY Times* op-ed, Gen. McChrystal wrote about a new initiative for which he serves on the advisory committee. This initiative is called the Veterans Coalition for Common Sense. “It is led by the Navy combat veteran Capt. Mark Kelly and his wife, the former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.”

“Those of us serving on the advisory committee,” Gen. McChrystal continued, “come from every branch of our military and virtually every rank. We are trained in the use of firearms, and many of us have served in combat. And we all think our country must do more to save lives from being cut short by [our national crisis of] gun violence.”⁴

In the aftermath of Newtown and Charleston and now Orlando, the members of Congress bear a heavy burden of responsibility to stand up to the National Rifle Association and pass reasonable gun control legislation. Congress needs to stop listening to a lobbying group for gun manufacturers and to start listening to respected military leaders such as Mark Kelly and Stanley McChrystal.

³<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-jetblue-flight-orlando-grieving-grandmother-20160615-story.html>.

⁴Stanley McChrystal, “Home Should Not Be a War Zone,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2016, p. A29.

In the aftermath of Newtown and Charleston and Orlando, we ordinary Christians have a heavy burden of responsibility to stand up to hate speech, whenever and wherever we encounter it.

The young man who shot and killed nine African American members of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston one year ago, using a semi-automatic handgun he had received as a birthday present, was motivated to murder by the hate speech of the white supremacist movement.

We may never know what kinds of hate speech motivated the man who shot and killed 49 people at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando one week ago. It was probably a toxic brew of ISIS propaganda and religious homophobia, with who knows what else thrown in.

There's not a whole lot we ordinary Christians can do about ISIS propaganda. But there is a lot we can do about racism and homophobia and xenophobia. And we need to begin with self-awareness and repentance. Just as the lieutenant governor of Utah did when he spoke at a vigil in Salt Lake City. Just as the tax collector did in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, when he prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." And then, having felt the mercy and love of God, to go forth and share that mercy and love with others.

This morning, I read these words by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, from a post on Facebook: "Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good.

"What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing."⁵

Racism and homophobia and xenophobia are like cancers in the body of our common life as children of God. But they are not incurable cancers. They can be overcome: not by violence, not by coercion, but by love. By an accumulation of acts of love.

As we were reminded during last Sunday's Children's Day music video, love never fails.

As today's biblical text affirms, over and over again, we who follow Jesus are called to be agents and examples and embodiments of love in this broken and beautiful world.

There is no fear or hate in love, for perfect love casts out fear and hate.

⁵Clarissa Pinkola Estes, "We Were Made for These Times," http://www.grahameb.com/pinkola_estes.htm. (With special thanks to Ellen Jennings for her Facebook post to this link.)