

A Vision and A Dream

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Father's Day
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 19, 2016
Text: Acts 10:1-33

This has been a tough week for me and, I suspect, for you as well. We are all still trying to process the events of last weekend when a person made the incomprehensible decision to walk into a gay nightclub in Orlando and open fire with an Army assault weapon killing 49 people and injuring another 50. Newspapers, television and radio news broadcasts and social media have exploded with facts and figures, with innuendo and blame, with anger and outrage. Such a mass killing of young people in the prime of life for no other reason than being who God created them to be is incomprehensible. We cannot understand it and yet we keep trying. As a result, we are exhausted and weary and frightened about just what is happening in this country we thought we knew.

How could we be expected to understand that this shooter could not have gotten on an airplane because the authorities were already worried about him as a possible terrorist threat, but he could buy an army weapon – an assault rifle whose only purpose is to kill human beings – without a background check, without any questions? How could we be expected to understand his motive for this horrendous crime? Some point to the words he

said in the midst of the carnage pledging his allegiance to ISIS and Al Qaeda and Hezbollah and try to blame all Muslims as a result. The only problem is that he obviously didn't know what he was talking about because those three organizations do NOT get along. It is simply not possible to belong to all three. So what does that say about the shooter? I don't know and I don't care. All I care about is that 50 innocent people are dead and another 50 are wounded. For no reason. And that is sin.

Senseless killing is sin by the standards of any world religion – Christianity and Judaism we know personally. It is also sin, grievous sin, in Islam. The Qu'ran has many verses or surahs which condemn the sin of murder as the 5th Great Sin. One in particular is this:

“Whoever slays a soul, unless it be for a manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men.” (Surah al-Mā'ida 5:32)

In other words, if you murder one person without justification, then it is though you murdered all of humanity. Similarly, if you work to save one person, to keep one person alive who might otherwise be murdered, it is though you saved all of humanity. We can see in these words of its most holy book that Islam is indeed a religion of peace. But it has been co-opted and corrupted by power hungry madmen trying to use God as an excuse to get what they want. What happened in the Pulse nightclub in

Orlando had nothing, *nothing*, to do with Islam and everything to do with creating terror through murderous rage acted upon.

This senseless mass shooting and all the ones which have preceded it in this country – and we all know there have been far too many – is sin, pure and unadulterated. So what I am wondering, what I suspect you are wondering too is – where do we go from here? What can we salvage from the mess we find ourselves in to create a new vision for the world in which we live? What is the dream we should, we must, aspire to, reach for, pray for and act to make real? That IS the question before us, dear friends. And I think it is not coincidental that it is the question before us on Father’s Day because God has an amazing way of bringing together all sorts of things in unexpected ways to help us figure out what God is trying to tell us.

At its core, that’s what this morning’s story from the book of Acts is about. This story is considered one of the “turning point” stories of the growth of Christianity from a small band of rag-tag, scraggly followers to an organized religion that spans the world. It’s about the most unlikely people having the most likely encounter engineered by God in a most surprising way. This story describes the first time a Gentile who is a Roman Army officer becomes a Christian without first becoming a Jew. It seems like a moot point to us now because the two religions are so distinctly different to us. But it was not always so, and this story reveals the

point at which Christianity as a Jewish reform movement became Christianity as a pathway to God separate and distinct from Judaism. That's the significance of Peter's vision of the sheet filled with clean and unclean animals coming down from heaven while a voice commanded him to "kill and eat." Being a good Jew and unwilling to transgress the purity laws which said some things were pure and others impure, Peter says "no! I will not eat what is unclean and profane." The voice responds by saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This was repeated for Peter three times and it confused the heck out of him because it was not his understanding of God and impurity at all.

In the midst of his confusion, the Holy Spirit comes to him to let him know that three men are on their way to find him and he is to find them and go with them without hesitation. So, Peter went out to look for the men just as they were arriving at the place where he was staying. He asked them why there were looking for him and they explained they had been sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer living in Caesarea and a very devout man. It seemed Cornelius had a vision from God that he should send for Peter at just about the same time Peter was having a vision from God showing him that what he thought was profane wasn't. This was vitally important because before the vision of the sheet with unclean animals, Peter would have absolutely refused to go to the home of Cornelius for any reason because Cornelius, though

devout, was not a Jew. But, because of his vision from God, Peter does go to meet with Cornelius and discovers that Cornelius and his whole household wanted to be baptized into the faith of Jesus Christ. And that's just what happened. This is the turning point story of when Christianity became open to all who desired to know more of Jesus and what it means to follow him.

So, this story is clearly about how God calls us to form new visions for how the world can be, how God always intended the world to be. This story is about God actually providing the visions, the dreams, that reveal where we need to go, what we need to do, and what we need to let go of in order to make God's vision, God's dream, God's hope for humanity into reality. God handed the idea to Cornelius to search for Peter. God handed the idea to Peter to let go of narrow thinking and tight boundaries so that he could really listen to Cornelius when they finally met. God acted in ways these two people could understand and respond to. And the history of the world was changed when they each independently of each other chose to act on God's ideas.

When I chose this text for Father's Day, perhaps you can see that my thinking was to tie in how fathers and "like-fathers" in our lives play such a key role in teaching us how to dream, how to reach for those things we thought were impossible. I know that not all fathers are like this, but I know some are because mine sure was. And Peter's surely was. And Peter has certainly been

that kind of father to our children. But I do believe that we have all encountered men in our lives who have been “like-fathers” to us, men God has sent into our lives at just the time we needed them to make that turning point pivot in life that set us on the course we were meant to follow. I know God does this and I also know that far too often in the hustle and bustle of daily life, we forget those special men and the turning points they encouraged. That’s what I wanted us to ponder together this Father’s Day.

But now, in the wake of the Orlando massacre, I think we have to take it further than that. God has put us all in a position in the aftermath of that 45 minutes of death and destruction where we must think more deeply about the gift of life itself that comes to each of us through the grace of God. Every person in the world has a biological father and a biological mother. That’s just a given. Every person in the Pulse nightclub that night had a biological mother and a biological father. That too is just a given. I’ve been thinking a lot about that simple fact this week. I’ve been thinking about it because I know that some of the fathers of those young people who died or were injured didn’t know their child was gay because it was just too scary to tell them. I also know that some of them who had come out to their fathers had been disowned and abandoned as a result. That’s why this shooting in Pulse, a safe space for the LGBTQ young adults who were there that night was so awful. Pulse was the place they could be who

God created them to be. For that reason, it was indeed holy ground to them, strange as that sounds to us. As I think about all those young people who died knowing their fathers had rejected them, all those lying in hospitals longing for a father's embrace that will probably never come, my heart breaks. It breaks again for the father-child bonds shattered and broken when they need not have been, leaving so much loss and emptiness where there could have been love. I grieve especially for those fathers who realized too late that their gay children were still their children, special and gifted and talented as they had always been. For those fathers it is too late to say "I'm sorry." It's too late to say, "I love you." I can't imagine living with that kind of pain.

My heart also breaks every time I hear the shooter's father pleading that he can't imagine what had happened to his son that he would do such a terrible thing, desperate to reassure himself along with us that nothing he had done as a father had been a part of this crime. Who knows if that's the case or not? It doesn't really matter. What's done is done. But surely the pain of that father is just beginning.

So where does all this leave us? What of dreams and visions? What of God's plans for us in our lives each day, in our country each day, in our church each day? What is to become of us and God's vision of shalom, of peace for all humankind which the

Bible and the Torah and the Qu'ran tell us over and over and over again is God's vision for this beautiful Creation God gifted to us? Well, that's all up to us, as it has always been. I think it will come down to whether or not we have the wisdom and the courage to recognize the Orlando event as a turning point – a tipping point for change – or not. We can make the changes that need to be made so that another Orlando, another San Bernadino, another Sandy Hook never happens again. We know we need to love unconditionally no matter what letters of the alphabet define someone's life. Everyone, EVERYONE, is equally beloved and precious to God and they should be to us too. The simple truth is, dear friends, we do know what we need to do and what God expects us to do to make the world safe every day for everyone. And we know what needs to happen will probably make some people angry.

But, honestly, I'm not worried about them. I don't need to because God has planted this vision in my heart – a vision of a world where everyone has a place to live and enough to eat, a dream where everyone lives in safety and peace because we all have finally figured out that love always triumphs over hate. I'm ready to be like Peter and go out searching for the thing God needs me to do. I'm ready to be like Cornelius and put my faith in God into action, even if that means taking a risk. What about you? Amen.

