

June 18 & 19, 2016  
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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All Saints Parish  
Syracuse, NY

### A Look in the Mirror

A young college student describes a rather startling experience that happened during her first weeks in school. A chair was placed in the front of the classroom facing the 20 or so students assembled for one of the first classes in the education program. The professor asks the student to sit in the chair, hands her a mirror and asks her to describe herself.

One by one each student was called forward... The painfully shy 17-year-old felt that this was almost more than she could manage, questioning to herself 'what in God's name is the professor's point?'

When all the students went through the exercise, the professor explained:

"You cannot hope to teach anyone anything until you know yourself; until you are comfortable in your own skin; until you are prepared to be yourself in the presence of others."

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Sisters and brothers, the challenge given to those college students is a challenge for us all. What does it mean to be who we are? What is my identity as a truly authentic human person? What does it mean to accept myself as a person created in God's image and likeness?

The journey of self acceptance is the journey to become the persons God created us to be....

In our Gospel today, Jesus – addressing his disciples, his intimate friends, is reflecting on these very same questions: "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus knew who he was. Jesus lived his identity... was faithful to his identity: being the beloved Son of God – to the very end... on the cross.

The Spiritual Giants tell us that the journey to discovering and ultimately embracing our authentic human identity is a process and sometimes painful, confusing and risky.

Jesus spent 40 days – a symbolic number, we know, indicating that he spent a "long time" – struggling "in the desert" – alone – tempted to embrace inauthentic ways of being and living out his identity. But, ultimately he departed from the desert – at peace with himself and his Father – to live out his identity as the beloved Son of God.

The Trappist monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, says that discovering and embracing our identity entails rejecting the identity, the masks that we wear, the ‘shallow-self,’ the ‘superficial-self,’ the self created in the images and likenesses of what the world and culture often expects me to be... in order to discover and embrace my true-self, my authentic-self, my real-self. And it’s in embracing this true-self, that we discover inner peace and freedom and the spark of the Divine within. It is then that we discover the capacity to be at peace with others.

This is what it means when we greet one another with “*Namaste:*”

“I honor the place in you in which the entire universe dwells.”

“I honor the place in you which is of love, of truth, of light and of peace.”

“When you are in that place in you...

and I am in that place in me...

*we are one*”!

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Where am I going with all this?

Once again, we as a nation are struggling to recover from another terrible mass shooting that killed fifty, mostly young, people in an Orlando nightclub.

I use the number fifty intentionally, because the shooter too is a human being created in God’s image and likeness... but, from what we know, a confused, a hate-filled, angry person; perhaps struggling with mental illness, struggling with his demons..., struggling with homophobia... perhaps internalized homophobia; ...struggling with his identity. Seemingly a lone wolf, but encouraged by the evil of ISIS.

The scene of the terrorist attack was a gay nightclub... the nightclub, called *Pulse*, was a safe-space where LGBTQ folks could gather, sing, dance and be themselves – without fear of ridicule and rejection and hate.

One could compare a gay nightclub in recent years, to a club where African-Americans would gather on Saturday night in the South during segregation. For African- Americans living in constant fear of humiliation, degradation and violence, even lynching, by the white man; the club was a safe-space where people could be themselves. African-American theologian, James H. Cone, states:

“There was always a lot of excitement and joy at juke-joints, a people swinging with passion on Friday and Saturday nights, because they could express themselves fully, let themselves go with no thought of tomorrow... At juke-joints, blacks could even talk back to “the man.” Blacks enjoyed Friday and Saturday night so much they nearly forgot, at least for a few hours, whatever humiliations they endured during the week.” (James H. Cone, Ph.D., *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 2011, Orbis Books.)

... quite a parallel between juke-joints and gay clubs...

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Sisters and brothers, as followers of Jesus, ...as disciples of Jesus, ...as Roman Catholics, ...as Americans, what are some teachable moments that we are called to reflect on in the wake of the Orlando tragedy?

First: This is the time for us to stand with and support our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. America at its best is an America that celebrates diversity and individual liberty and, as our Second Reading from Paul to the Corinthians states so clearly, for those baptized into Christ Jesus, *we are all one, we are all children of God*. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, gay or straight, insider or outsider, superior or inferior... we are all *one* in Christ Jesus, created in God's image and likeness.

Unfortunately, religion – including our own – often, rather than affirming LGBTQ men and women, has planted the seeds of contempt and hatred which ultimately lead to violence. In other words, there is blood on the hands of religious bigots that feed and even create the fear and hatred that leads to violence in Orlando and elsewhere.

On a personal note, my journey to self-acceptance as a gay man was a long and painful one. It took years of struggle to be able to look in the mirror and accept myself. The inaccurate and out-dated and downright false and mean teachings of the Church contributed significantly to my struggle. Ironically it was the compassionate, tender, affirming, Spiritual Direction of a Catholic priest – Father Paul Curtin, a Jesuit at Christ the King Retreat House back in the 70s – that introduced me to a loving and compassionate God, who created me – a gay man in God's own image and likeness!

To date, most of our Catholic Bishops in our country, while decrying the murders in Orlando have – with just a small handful of exceptions – been silent in offering words of solidarity and support to the targeted and grieving LGBTQ community.

Perhaps as an action step, we might consider writing a note or an email to our Bishop Cunningham and encourage him to make a statement of support and solidarity.

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Second: The founding parents of our Nation, who crafted the Second Amendment to the Constitution, who obviously had no knowledge of assault rifles of mass destruction, must be turning over in their graves! More Americans have died from guns, including suicides, since just 1970 than died in all the wars in US history, going back to the American Revolution.

In the United States, more preschoolers, up to the age of four, are shot dead each year by guns than are police officers... .

Although we cannot prevent every gun death any more than we can prevent every car accident, experts estimate that a serious effort to reduce gun violence, would reduce the death toll by one-third – which would save more than 10,000 lives a year.

We must demand that our elected officials take action.

Perhaps some have seen the Op-Ed piece by General Stanley McCrystal, former Commander of US and International Forces in Afghanistan, published in the New York Times last Friday, in which he powerfully states the case for our need to address gun violence; and aligns himself with the new organization called the Veterans Coalition for Common Sense established by Congresswoman Gabby Gifford and her husband, Vietnam Combat Veteran Navy Capt. Mark Kelly.

In the article, General McCrystal points out that last weekend, in addition to the 50 lives lost in Orlando, 121 people across the country were shot ... on an average weekend.

We have copies of the Op-Ed available at the entrances to church and have provided contact information for our Congressman John Katko should any of you like to take the action step of contacting him to encourage him to support sensible gun control measures.

A third point of reflection: responding to the Orlando massacre and other acts of terrorism by barring people of Muslim Faith from entering the Country for no reason other than their stated faith, until they can be 'checked out,' is *un-American* and *un-Christian* – even in these most challenging times and situations. There are as many good, peace-loving and God-fearing Muslims to be found as there are Catholics or Methodists or Mormons or Seventh-Day Adventists... . Evil and evil-intent escape no religion.

In conclusion, we present the video reflection "Pulse," created by Brandon Skeie and Eli Lieb, honoring those killed at the Orlando club of that name. As we watch and listen, I invite all of us to hold our hands over our own hearts... and feel the pulse that connects each of us with all humanity.

<https://youtu.be/NV6IC8XK36Q>