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## *Bearing Witness*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Proper 7 – Year C**

I had wanted to offer you today some coherent, comforting message about the tragedies we've witnessed this week—especially the mass shooting in Orlando. And I tried, I really did. But it just wasn't working. Then, I remembered a phrase I learned from Barbara Brown Taylor: “the danger of a single story.” She was speaking to prisoners, assuring them that they're not defined solely by the story that brought them to prison. Yet these words—“the danger of a single story”—resonate today, as well.

The Orlando massacre cannot be reduced to a single story or issue or perspective, either: it's at once an act of terror, a hate crime, an expression of homophobia, the cry of a tortured individual, the violation of safe space, and another instance of gun violence. Its victims include the 49 people killed, and 53 wounded, and all their loved ones. And they include the other 200 or so people who were at the club—and all the first responders, law enforcement, and medical teams—who bore witness to the carnage, and who will never be the same because of it. Those of us watching from afar are impacted, too—especially the LGBTQ community, for whom this is yet another expression of the animosity and fear it's long confronted.

We're all reminded of the hard reality of evil, and our own vulnerability. We people of faith may even find our convictions shaken: how does this trauma fit into the story we tell about God, and our world, and ourselves?

Of course, we want to *make* it fit. We want to make it make sense—to reassert order, and control. And so we jump to the defense of God, or our view of God. We insist on some kind of meaning or purpose. We imagine a silver lining, or skip ahead to a happy ending. Or we simply turn away.

Unfortunately, this is what religious people often do: uneasy with the mystery of evil and suffering, we try to cover it up with answers and explanations. Understandably, we want to make the pain go away, as quickly as possible. But in the process, we risk glossing over the very real suffering that's in front of us today—and will linger long after. We risk silencing people who are hurting—and who need to know that their suffering has been seen, and will not be forgotten.

It's ironic, really, given that our own scriptures refuse to hide from pain and refuse to be reduced to a single story or perspective. Just look at our psalm today. The psalmist cries out to God, giving voice to anger, despair, and hope, all in the same breath. The psalmist holds together that which it would be more convenient to separate and makes it prayer.

What if we, too, instead of using religion to avoid the darkness, drew on the resources of faith to enter into it—and to seek God there, too? What if, instead of using religion to patch it all up, we let this suffering break us open? What if we let it break open our hearts; our communities; our churches; our preferred narratives about the world and God, others and ourselves. What if, instead of trying to fit everything into the story *we* want to tell, we chose to listen instead? To listen to the pain. To listen to those who are hurting. To listen to their various, complex stories, and let ourselves be changed by them.

This is bearing witness: not narrowing everything down to a single, correct story; but rather, being willing to hear these multiple stories, and to bear them, without knowing how it all fits together, or how it ends. [\[i\]](#) In her book *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones says that this is grace in its most radical form: “not the reassuring ending of an orderly story, but the

incredible insistence on love amid fragmented, unraveled, human lives.” [\[ii\]](#)

It is hard, and it’s scary, and, in an odd way, it’s beautiful, too. Or, at least, so suggests Kate Braestrup, a chaplain to game wardens and law enforcement in Maine. Recalling an especially heart-breaking case—the murder of a young woman—she recalls also the miracle of all the people who showed up, to help search for the victim and to support her family.

“They couldn’t turn back time,” she says, “or make her be alive. And the fact that they’re willing to go and respond to these things when they can’t fix it is, in some ways, the most beautiful thing I see.”

“It’s one thing,” she continues, “to get to be Superman. You swoop in and save the day, and it’s very satisfying when that happens.... But what’s amazing to me is that these police officers and game wardens actually deliberately set up their lives ... to go and do these things that are excruciatingly painful and that don’t fix or undo the harm and the evil that they see.” [\[iii\]](#)

This is what we’re called to do, too, in our own ways: to show up where there’s harm and evil, even when we can’t fix it; even when we don’t know what to say or do; even when the pain is our own. We’re called to be present, and insist on love, and trust in God—even when we don’t see the way out.

Now, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t other work for us to do, also. There is! But we may not know what that work is, really, until we slow down, and listen, and grieve.

And we must remember, too, that violence, hate, and death are not the only story, either. There’s also the beautiful story of the love and life that persist, in the midst of suffering—and of the God who stays with us, and empowers us to stay with one another.

So today, a week after the Orlando massacre, and a year after the Charleston shooting, and so many other tragedies in between, may we have the grace and faith to bear witness: to bear witness *both* to the violence and hurt in our world and lives, and to the grace of God in the middle of it.

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[\[i\]](#) Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (2010), 163.

[\[ii\]](#) Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (2009), xiii.

[\[iii\]](#) Krista Tippett, *Being Wise*, 151.