

Tsarnaev our neighbor

By [John Kiess](#)

May 14, 2013

The question of [where to bury Tamerlan Tsarnaev](#) was resolved last week thanks largely to the efforts of Martha Mullen, a United Methodist woman from Richmond, Virginia. "I heard the story...that he was unable to be buried and that people are protesting him," [Mullen told NPR](#), "and it made me think of Jesus' words: Love your enemies."

Mullen decided to reach out to religious organizations in the area, including Islamic Funeral Services of Virginia, which eventually helped to arrange a burial plot in the Al-Barzakh cemetery in Doswell, Virginia. Tsarnaev's family buried him there last Thursday.

In spearheading the burial effort, Mullen, a mental health counselor and a graduate of United Theological Seminary, took particular inspiration from the Parable of the Good Samaritan. "Jesus tells us to love your neighbor as yourself," she said. "And your neighbor is not just someone you belong with, but someone who is alien to you."

When Doswell residents awoke Friday to the news that Tsarnaev was buried in their town, [few were eager to embrace Mullen's perspective](#). "We don't want the county to be remembered as the resting place of the remains for someone who committed a terrible crime," said Floyd Thomas, chairman of Carolin County's board of supervisors.

Some questioned the legality of the move; others expressed anxiety over vandalism and public safety. "The whole Muslim community here is furious," said Imam Ammar Amonette of the Islamic Center of Virginia. "Frankly, we are furious that we were never given any information. It was all done secretly behind our backs."

Despite the backlash, the Al-Barzakh cemetery stands by its actions. [So does Mullen:](#)

I think people are probably going to be upset and irritated and disagree with what this interfaith group has decided to go forward with, but I feel like it was the right thing and it's important to be true to the principles of your faith.

She added, “If I'm going to live my faith, then I'm going to do that which is uncomfortable.”

Earlier in the week, as the controversy intensified, support for Tsarnaev’s burial began to build among some Christians. [Evangelicals for Social Action organized a petition](#) calling on Christians “who own cemeteries or land to flow with the grace of God and offer to lay Tsarnaev to rest.” In Worcester, Massachusetts, where Tsarnaev’s body was being held amidst protest, the Saints Francis & Thérèse Catholic Worker held a vigil in support of his burial. [They said this:](#)

Although we strongly condemn the Boston Marathon bombings, we believe the religious and civic duty to bury the dead holds for everyone, including Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Burying the dead is a civilized act, which in this context is a powerful rejection of revenge as well as a form of closure.

Then there was Paul Keane, a graduate of Yale Divinity School. He [offered a burial plot next to his own mother.](#)

As a corporal work of mercy, burying the dead—particularly the poor, outcast and imprisoned—has a long lineage in the Christian tradition. The fourth-century theologian Lactantius wrote that

the last and greatest office of piety is the burying of strangers and the poor... We will not suffer the image and workmanship of God to lie exposed as a prey to beasts and birds, but we will restore it to the earth, from which it had its origin.

Many of the church’s oldest religious orders were committed to burying marginalized members of society, and numerous religious confraternities in the Middle Ages were devoted to burial as a work of charity to the abandoned, which they extended to those sentenced to death. Among others, the Catholic Worker movement and the Saint Joseph of Arimathea Society have revived this tradition in recent years.

Tsarnaev’s burial echoes this tradition’s emphasis on the dignity of human life, even of those who have committed horrendous evils. It might be consoling to believe that such offenders were something less than human—then we wouldn’t have to reckon with the true extent of the human capacity for evil. Burying Tsarnaev removes this

consolation. Yet such an expression of love provides its own consolation, one more difficult and real.