

A baptism in a world of violence

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When I parked the minivan in the church lot, it still sounded like the type of horror we have had no choice but to become stoic about: 20 dead in a bar, as many more wounded, a dead shooter and a thicket of questions. By the time I returned it had become something different. The deadliest shooting in the nation's history, at a nightclub filled with LGBTQ people, an ISIS connection of some kind—and a shock that could alter our politics and public discourse in far-reaching ways.

Between turning the car radio off and on, I baptized a young woman. She scrupled to be baptized at our Lutheran church's little font, so we borrowed a baptistry from the local Methodist-Baptist union church. There, in the midst of a little riot of American denominationalism, I stepped into the pool and made my first attempt at submerging another human being. It's a fittingly brutal experience, much more expressive of the drowning of the Old Adam than our genteel, Neutrogena cleansing is. I wanted to stop halfway through and apologize.

As time dilated in Orlando—for the victims waiting for emergency surgery, for frantic family and friends waiting for news of loved ones gone silent, even for the news-hungry public waiting for more details—it constricted in the church. From "in the beginning Your Spirit moved over the waters" to "child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever," we summarize the story of creation and redemption into which a new sister is abruptly and perfectly plunged.

It is tempting to take a kind of comfort in the juxtaposition. The world has been dying since that apple theft, if not before, yet we baptize one another into eternal life. But I'm not sure that's the right way to think of it. Jesus warns his hearers that in the days of Noah people were eating and drinking and marrying until the moment of the cataclysm. I don't think it would be a stretch to add "baptizing and breaking bread" to his litany.

We'll be ok, we may say to ourselves. We are the church that is heir to God's promise of grace. Or, less honorably, we are people whose world can absorb and withstand irruptions of evil now and then. Life will go on. The horror can be assimilated somehow, muted or amplified as needed for the stories we wish to keep telling about ourselves and the world, about who does these things and why.

It was surely significant that a gay nightclub was attacked, significant that plenty of public figures managed to overlook that particular fact in their statements of condolence, significant that a phoned-in allegiance to ISIS preceded it, significant that the engines of demagoguery fired up as they inevitably would. At a certain point, however, the significances blur. We've been through this so many times, in so many iterations. An African American church, a Planned Parenthood facility, a gay bar—what purpose can we serve by seizing control of yet another such story?

All we've learned is that virtually any American with a grievance can get a weapon of vast killing power quickly and easily and turn it toward virtually any target he or she wishes. We humans all live, as Epicurus said, in an unwalled city.

In a devastating episode of NPR's [Embedded podcast](#), Kelly McEvers reports on the rash of gang-organized bus shootings in El Salvador. By targeting bus drivers and passengers, the gangs were able to paralyze a whole city. We hear people piling onto truck after truck to get to work as the civic infrastructure shudders apart. One coordinated attack at a few critical pillars of daily life becomes an attack on the very notion of a society.

This logic laps at our own ankles. There is no need for the angry or deluded to wait upon the slow levers of legislation or the slower levers of culture when an AR-15 is close at hand to shift the terms of public life. Let each one be his own police, armed to his own need. Let each household be its own water supply. There is no good in being patient with the ungainly, hypocritical norms we have developed for regarding each other as humans and citizens, however wicked. Those norms are just so much "political correctness," inhibiting the blunt, fierce action we demand to protect ourselves.

Sometimes the better hope Christians wish to claim must be more deeply immanent than the promises and threats around us. Sometimes the better country Christians are said to seek, following the example of Abraham and Sarah sojourning in alien lands, must be nearer than our own nation. Of them and all our ancestors in faith,

the letter to the Hebrews says, the world was not worthy. This was most certainly true, and still is—at least if the resolve of the young woman I baptized is any indication, a young woman who trusted God to make her part of the body of his son and trusted God's unworthy minister to lower her into the water and bring her up again safely.

Even an unworthy world, however, needs to be defended—and in its smallest, homeliest, most routine dignity.