

A Fresh Start
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2nd Corinthians 5:16-21

Many pastors take Mondays off as a Sabbath Day Off, which means that they get an opportunity to rest and recharge. But that doesn't work for me. If I don't restart my work week on a Monday, I'll have a hard time remembering what happened on Sunday by the time Tuesday comes around.

And every Monday, no matter how trying the prior week has been, I like to think that there will be another chance to begin again, and so I've nicknamed them "Fresh Start Mondays".

We all need a fresh start in our lives sometimes, don't we? Whether it's our careers or our families or our studies or our relationships or life in general, sometimes the best thing we can do for ourselves is to turn the page and start all over with a blank slate.

Sometimes, it's not quite that easy. Take this week, for example.

I briefly mentioned in our prayer concerns last Sunday the distressing word from Orlando, (or at least, the news that was being reported at that time). Like many of my clergy friends, I only had time to glance at the news before coming in, so what I wound up offering in our time of prayer was incomplete.

I didn't know at the time that the count of those killed and injured would rise so high. I didn't realize that the fact that it happened in a gay nightclub on Latin night would be particularly painful. I didn't know that my LGBTQ friends and family would feel so targeted, scared and hurt. Or that the pastors of some Christian churches would use this tragedy to ramp up their particular brand of intolerance. I didn't remember that the Charlestown tragedy happened a year ago this week. Horrifying.

Sunday afternoon, as the news from Orlando became clearer, my heart became heavier. I felt heavy hearted and distracted at that evening's PF youth group meeting, at a loss what to say or feel or do. That night, I

couldn't sleep... which has become my body's way of handling what feels dangerously like PTSD following mass shootings.

And that is why this Monday morning, instead of placing my efforts into the "Fresh Start Monday" of Strawberry Festival week, I took some time at home just to cry. Maybe you did too.

That afternoon I found a vigil, hosted by the Open & Affirming churches of New Haven, and made plans to attend. Hundreds of people came to pray, to sing, to light candles and offer one another support. Those who were brave enough to speak offered what so many of us needed to hear: authentic voices of deep lament, care and hope. More than anything else, they offered grace.

Which brings me to these words from Paul's to the church in Corinth:

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Here's what I take from it: Christianity is all about second chances. It is about resurrection; it is about living the radical truth that death and pain and evil and our own imperfections like racism and sexism and homophobia and violence will never-ever-ever have the final word.

Grace is real. And in times like this, it is good to remember that we – as individuals and as a society - have the opportunity for a fresh start whenever we are ready to take the first step.

The Christian Church (with a capital "C", meaning ALL OF US) has the opportunity before it to repent for the judgements made against those in the LGBTQ community. We also have the opportunity to examine our role in racism and systematic violence and say "no more".

You know we have the chance to do better – we just have to want to.

No matter how dire and devastating and systematic these troubles may seem, the gospel tells us that this is not how the story is going to end, and we are here to do something – and that something is LOVE.

Jesus came into this world to show that God's power is far greater than any mess we manage to get ourselves into. A fresh start was, and still is, God's

promise. So we hold on to the miraculous truth that even when things seem hopeless and dark a light always shines.

As much as some of us would like to change the world by ourselves; that is not the way we naturally operate. From the very beginning, we were created to stand in covenant with each another. We need community to do change well.

When human beings were not getting along too well, Jesus came into this world so that we could learn how to live a new life rooted in justice, peace, joy and reconciliation. And Jesus gathered everyone-everyone-everyone... so we do too.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth because they were not getting along with one another. If you think about it in very simple terms, Paul kind of pulled the Jesus Card on them when he reminded them that just as resurrection happened once, it was still happening in their midst.

But it may be that if resurrection is to be real today, we have to seek reconciliation first. But we have to want a better world where all God's children can live in peace and safety. We cannot truly be reconciled with ourselves if we are not reconciled with one another.

This takes a lot of work. It is not easy to offer that first olive branch of peace, especially when the recipient is grieving, as so many of our LGBTQ siblings are. 'Thoughts and prayers' ring hollow after so many years of discrimination, exclusion, and most recently, ridiculous and painful Restroom Wars.

Maybe it is not easy to say that we are sorry for the actions of those who caused this pain, because we didn't do it ourselves. But it is important to reach out in love to those who are hurting. Know that when we offer hope and healing to the broken-hearted, it brings God's kingdom a little closer.

And it is critical for MCC, this group of committed Christians, to proclaim sanctuary for all God's children.

Just as it is important to speak up against the homophobia we all hear around us.

Here's the thing: when we host a food drive for the Monroe Food Pantry or go visit someone in the nursing home or donate money we are living out the

Gospel. Those acts of love are tangible and important, and MCC does this particularly well. But maybe now is the moment to live out our less tangible goal, which is to be Ambassadors of Love (as Peggy so well put it in her scripture introduction) and Agents of Reconciliation.

When hope seems lost, we can be the hands and feet and face and voice of Christ to remind the world that resurrection is possible, especially to those in the LGBTQ population who has experienced such trauma and pain. What would it look like if we held that kind of sacred space?

We are halfway through the Strawberry Festival, one of the most tangible seasons of the year in which this church shows how much we love each other. My God, it is a gift to be here for one another – we are fortunate, indeed.

But this weekend we also have the opportunity to tell the world that we are here for those in the LGBTQ community, their families and loved ones. They are precious and they are loved.

Today is fresh start. Maybe for you, it is a fresh start to imagine reconciliation where once the doors were closed. It's a fresh start for our faith community too, especially when we are bold enough to say it is possible to love and honor Jesus AND all God's children.

Unequivocally, without any qualifiers.

Because you know what? They will know we are Christians by our love. Amen.