

Guest editorial: What I learned after the Pulse nightclub shooting

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Our natural tendency after a horrific event is to rush too quickly into blame and explanation.



Joel C. HunterAfter the Pulse nightclub shooting here in Orlando, the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, which targeted the LGBTQ community and left 50 people dead including the shooter, I probably was not alone in asking, “Who did this and why?”

But the question was not merely for information; it was for exemption from the responsibility of human—and religious—hate.

I wanted to blame terrorists, or at least bigots, and assign the act to a crazy person. But Jesus had taught me, “Before you point out the speck in someone else’s eye, note the log in your own.”

More than a log

Unfortunately, this was more than a speck. And it has proved to be more than a log.

Differences in the interpretation of Scripture, detached from personal relationship, can grow into distrust, then into division and possibly into destruction. We have what has been termed “a hermeneutic (interpretation) of suspicion” when we do not take the trouble to know the context and the person whence the difference comes.

That was the beginning of my journey. I knew and was friends with several Muslims, so I had no temptation to blame Islam. I could just assign the act to insanity or hate, but something else troubled me.

I didn’t know the victims. I didn’t know anything about their community. I was brokenhearted, not because I had so many relationships in the LGBTQ community, but because I had so few. Was I complicit in the divisions that led to this destruction? Could anything I said, or preached, have led to this kind disrespect or prejudice or ostracism for that community?

Price of ignorance

The price of ignorance is distance, not only in relationships, but also from truth. It is not a benign distance. If Pulse taught us anything, it was that communities that have been isolated—even self-isolated—because of societal rejection can be attacked by more than words. When religious rejection happens because we have no understanding or relationships, it can be even more malicious, because we think we are defending morality and faith.

We also know from Pulse the benefits of a second chance.

Orlando did pull together, including the religious communities—even the conservative evangelical churches. We all wanted to be a part of the response and a part of the healing. So many prayer services were held, and

not a few new relationships across gay/straight lines were initiated.

Fading chances

The problem with second chances, though, is that they quickly fade in priority when life as we know it returns.

So, the question remains: How will Pulse make for a new community with less division and distancing?

To all of this, those of us in the Christian faith should be best prepared for repentance and changing our ways. We should be able to admit we have been part of the condemnation people feel, and even though our interpretation of Scripture labels certain behaviors “sin,” it does not make us judges of other people’s acceptability. In fact, the story of our faith is that we were unacceptable, and the God we worship sent his Son to build a relationship with us. We are “saved by grace”—unmerited favor—so who are we to relate to anyone with anything other than grace?

Lessons learned

Here are the lessons I’ve learned and am still learning:

- Catastrophes help us face both our faults and our faith.
- Differences will either educate us as to other perspectives—or can grow toxic and isolating, and possibly end in some sort of attack.
- We are not fully responsible for the terrible things that happen, but we are not fully exonerated, either. All of us can unwittingly contribute by the way we discount people, and all of us can do better in valuing people.
- Religious people—and Christians in particular—have an extra obligation to learn from and love people who interpret Scripture differently than we do. The obligation is to God, because those people were made in his image

and have innate value. The price of not doing so is a self-righteous anger that hurts people and makes our faith null. When we want to condemn others instead of trusting God to judge them, we are not being people of faith. We are being people who just want to fight with someone who is different than we are.

A year after Pulse, I am still learning the cost of ignorance, the benefits of a second chance and the depths of grace.

Joel C. Hunter is the senior pastor of Northland Church in Orlando. [Religion News Service](#) distributed his column.