

Culture of violence

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I settle into the back pew of Northminster Presbyterian Church with a lump in my throat as we chant those familiar words from the Taize community:

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten.

Those who seek God shall never go wanting.

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten,

God alone fills us.

The lines are full of lies. We had a week of frightening headlines as each day greeted us with a new horror. Yet, the chorus soothes my troubled soul as I inhale and imagine God filling me with peace in the midst of all those dreadful dispatches.

Random members of the congregation stand, light a candle, and speak words of gratitude and sorrow. We attempt to enfold our burdens with syllables—health problems, broken relationships, work stress, impending death, and piling debt. With a prayer, each person methodically places a wax stick in the sand, and it burns as a symbol of a personal longing. Then the flames multiply, reminding us that a community shares our hopes.

This week, we feel the weight and yearnings of those far beyond our pews. We hold the pain of the country, as we pray for the bombing victims in Boston and those who suffer through the explosion in West, Texas. Someone addressed poison-laced letters to our politicians. We fought for sensible gun laws and felt desperate that our congress could not pass the legislation that a majority of Americans support, even after the mass shooting of children.

On that hard, wood bench, feeling crushed in a culture of violence, Rev. Laura Becker led us to sort out what it means to love and pray for our enemies. Our enemy had been at-large, the pictures of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev flashed in my mind just as they had flickered on television screens. I memorized the features of his young face—the wide eyes, tapered chin, and wayward hair. He seemed to be smiling, even though there was no forced curve on his lips. His high school teacher called him a “sweetheart.” His friends talked about how they partied with him and couldn’t imagine him being a part of such a plan.

Could this be the man who planted the pressure cooker nail bombs that ripped through the crowd at the Boston Marathon? Could this teenager turn brilliant skies and sculpted bodies into such savagery? Could he have been responsible for the blood-splattered pavement and missing legs?

Ethnically, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was from Chechnya, yet he was schooled in the United States. Ramzan Kadyrov, the [Chechen President quickly washed his hands of the matter](#), saying that since the boys were raised in the US, their beliefs were formed in our country and not in Chechnya.

How could our culture produce such an enemy? Randall Balmer takes a historical perspective that might apply. [He wrote](#) as he struggled with the issue of gun violence that we

need to advance a moral argument against the culture of violence that characterizes American society, from video games to motion pictures. We glorify violence on the hockey ice and the football field, not to mention the gladiatorial combat on cable television. It's no wonder that anyone thinking himself aggrieved resorts to violence.

More flames stand serenely in a row now, and the mere breath of those speaking their supplications makes them flicker. We are far from the constant chatter of CNN—heighted alerts, breaking news, and non-stop headlines.

Balmer's words linger in my mind. **How we can advance a moral argument against the culture of violence?** How can we, in our churches, create peace that might reshape a society? Do we create it by constantly protesting violence? By preaching? By [rethinking our foreign policy](#)? By somehow [making peace cool](#)? Do we just keep pointing out the barbaric nature of a country that welcomes military weapons to flood our streets?

As we begin to chant again, my eyes focus on the flickering fire. Across our country, prayer vigils transpire, quiet candles ignite, and pleading prayers are whispered. We know that men and women long for peace. We have these practices, we hold them in the bellies of our faith communities until they spring forth in our weary world in weeks like these. And for those of us who keep watch, we also keep wondering, *What can we do to transform our culture of violence?*