

A sermon that wasn't about me

By [Martha Spong](#)

June 20, 2016

We were away at a family funeral when the news broke about the shooting at Pulse in Orlando. We went through the motions of our last day in Maine—visiting the beach, eating dinner with loved ones—but we carried with us the rising number of deaths we saw in news alerts on our phones.

When we got home the next day, I started doing laundry, far more than the usual post-road-trip amount. I sought out things to wash, gathering new loads as soon as the day's clothes hit the hamper. When I ran out of clothes I turned to sheets, towels, bath mats, dishcloths. Each load is finite and satisfying, but every day more things get dirty. It's the perfect balance of completion and infinity for a person who is trying to gain a sense that life is not out of control but who is not yet convinced.

We preachers may not be able to control the world, but we do want to make theological sense out of things. If we can't do that, we at least want to offer some comfort. I have spoken about current and past tragedies; I have rewritten sermons at the last minute. I've even been the one to bring the news to the less plugged-in members of the congregation. Trayvon Martin, Gabby Giffords, Michael Brown—I have embraced the freedom of the pulpit and spoken my conscience about racism and white privilege, about American violence and the over-availability of guns.

When the shooting happened at Sandy Hook, the church I served needed more than this. A lot of teachers worshipped there, and they grieved deeply. They lamented their sense of helplessness. At a brief service the following Friday, we worked through our feelings in ritual actions. Everyone had the opportunity to take a turn at ringing the church bell, the old-fashioned kind with a rope you can actually see descending from the tower. Everyone wept, and while I usually guard my tears more closely, it seemed acceptable to cry as part of the community of like-minded souls who loved and cared for children and teachers. It was not about me.

I could not say the same after the news broke from Orlando on June 12. My queer identity overlaps with that of most of the victims, even if I have never danced in a gay club on Latin night.

How do we preachers convey our understanding of the gospel in response to a crisis that upsets our own center of gravity? I know better than to work out my own issues in the pulpit; it is not the comfortable couch of the analyst or social worker, and the congregation is not my collective therapist. Yet here was my existential worry displayed in a tragedy containing all sorts of questions about motive and circumstances.

My openness about who I am leaves me vulnerable to the hostility and judgment of others. Having worked hard to gain trust in a congregation dubious about a queer pastor, how could I lift up the LGBTQ people who lost their lives at Pulse without appearing to make it all about me? Did mostly Latinx, mostly Catholic club-goers matter to predominantly white Protestants in South Central Pennsylvania? And was their queerness one “other” too many?

It would certainly have been easier to ignore the events and preach about something else. No one would be able to accuse me of privileging myself, my perspective, my cause. I thought about this with each sock I paired, each t-shirt I folded, each skirt I hung quickly to avoid wrinkles.

I also thought about the story of one young man, Luis Vielma, whose face would not leave my mind. He wore a gray sweater vest and a Gryffindor tie for his job in the World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios. I could picture my daughter dressed the same way for Halloween. When I hung up a dress in my closet, a hanger holding her Gryffindor tie fell to the floor.

Early on Saturday morning, still undecided about my sermon, I threw another load of towels in the washer and then sat down to read the texts again. Preachers will know the undesirably empowering feeling I experienced. Captivating phrases leapt out of Psalm 42, “a multitude keeping festival” and “as with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me.” And then from Galatians 3—these texts were in the Revised Common Lectionary, it’s not like I went looking for them—*we are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free*; you know the rest.

This wasn’t about me. This was about the gospel.

I pulled up Luis’s picture on my laptop and started writing. The towels could wait.