

When I was in my third year of college, my best friend and I studied abroad in England for the fall semester, in 2007.

One weekend, we decided to take a weekend trip to Amsterdam to see the sights.

One of the sights that we were really interested in was the Red Light District.

Prostitution is legal there, and this is a famous neighborhood of the city, where women stand in doorways framed by red lights, and solicit customers.

Naturally, my friend and I wanted to see what it was all about.

Now, it might sound like a seedy neighborhood, but in fact, it's quite the contrary.

The Red Light District in Amsterdam is a hopping tourist destination.

Apparently my friend and I aren't the only ones who are curious about what legal prostitution looks like, especially in a historical, quaint and stunning European city.

But our fun, evening visit of indulging our curiosity quickly went south as we found ourselves in a terrifying situation.

You see, Amsterdam has lots of alleyways and narrow corridors, and the Red Light District isn't any different.

You meander among these winding paths until you find yourself along a canal, at which point you know you're back on a main road.

Well, my friend and I turned the corner of one of these alleyways, not knowing that some of them were dead ends.

We suddenly found ourselves at the end of a road, surrounded on 3 sides by blinding red lights and scantily clad women.

There was one way out, which was the same way we came in, and this exit was now blocked by giant men, who looked like bouncers.

Now, mind you, my friend and I are 20 years old.

We don't speak Dutch.

We are in an unfamiliar city and we feel trapped.

We both start panicking, hearts racing, turning in 360 degrees, trying to figure out how we can leave.

There are no other tourists here, just us, the prostitutes and the giant men.

We feel everyone's gaze upon us, our vulnerability and ignorance and fear probably radiating out of us like flashing red lights.

In moments like this, your brain is not always helpful.

Thoughts of every story that I'd ever heard about young women being kidnapped and killed overseas immediately start flooding my mind.

My mom's voice telling me, like a mantra to "be careful" and "stay safe" starts playing over and over again like a broken record.

Finally, I walk up to one of the men and express that we'd like to leave.

He doesn't budge.

Just stands there with his arms crossed.

Just as I am thinking to myself that we are either going to die or be forced into prostitution, one of the women, who is behind me, yells something to the big, burly men.

To this day, I have no idea what she said, but whatever it was, it made him step aside, and we were able to run back down that alley and back to the main road.

We immediately went back to the hostel that we were staying in, we weren't in the mood for exploring anymore of the city that night.

I tell you this story; because this is the most unsafe I have ever felt in my life.

I have never literally feared for my life or my safety the way I did in those moments.

That feeling is paralyzing.

There's a reason we shouldn't have to use those 'fight or flight' instincts, because the mental and emotional strain that it puts on your body is traumatizing.

Now, I am grateful to be able to say that 99% of the time, I feel safe.

Whether in Burlington, or travelling around the surrounding towns, even everywhere I go in Boston and the more urban areas, I feel safe.

I felt safe living in New York City and had no problem walking home at any hour of the night.

I felt safe living in Florida.

I felt safe in the many countries that I have visited.

What I am sad to say is that, while this should be the shared experience of everyone in our country, it isn't.

Safety has become a privilege.

Depending upon where you live, what you look like, who you love, how you worship, all these things can influence whether someone feels safe where they live.

Part of the reason the Orlando massacre was so devastating was because for many of those young people, that club was one of the only places in their lives where they felt safe.

Gay clubs have historically been a safe haven for LGBT folks to dance, to sing, to have fun, to enjoy each other, to experience their full humanity and live into their true identity without having to look over their shoulder.

Did you know that when some of these parents were notified that their children were killed, that's the first time they learned that their child was also gay?

They possibly felt safer in the club than they did in their own homes, and that safety that they found there and nowhere else, was robbed from them when the gunman opened fire.

And just a few days ago was the 1-year anniversary of the shooting of the 9 people at Bethel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Just like queer folks feel safe in clubs,

(quick side note about the word 'queer,' it has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community and while it was used as a derogatory term in the past, it is no longer, so I use it with the highest respect for those who use that term to identify themselves),

Okay, so while queer folks feel safe in clubs, the church has, in large part, played a huge role in black communities, because historically, that's the one place they have felt safe in an otherwise oppressively racist society.

Those people were gathered in their safe place to have a Bible Study, and that too was violated when the gunman opened fire.

And you know what these safe places have in common?

Music.

Music is critical to the survival of those who are oppressed because it is liberating and emancipating.

People like Cher and Madonna and Queen and Elton John and Dolly Parton and Boy George and George Michael and Cindy Lauper and Lady Gaga have all become musical icons for the gay community.

They were able to listen to and dance to this music, safely, in the confines of their sanctuary, the nightclub.

And African American Spirituals such as Swing Low Sweet Chariot and We Shall Overcome and Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen and A Balm In Gilead, these songs were all liberating for people of color who have been trapped by the bonds of slavery and segregation.

And they're able to sing and dance to this music safely, in the confines of their sanctuary inside every black church.

Music has the power to stir our souls, to connect us to each other and the one who created us, it helps us communicate across differences of language and perspective.

Everyone is equal on the dance floor and in the sanctuary.

Or they should be.

Music isn't only for those who are suffering or struggling, although its significance as a community's lifeline cannot be overstated.

Music is for all of us, for those of who, by the grace of God, are not suffering, it can be a means of celebration.

We sing Happy Birthday, we walk down the aisle to Mendelssohn's wedding march, we graduate to Pomp and Circumstance.

Music also has an indescribable emotional effect upon us from our earliest to our oldest years.

We soothe our little ones to sleep by singing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

And my grandmother, who has advanced Alzheimer's, who can't really speak and I doesn't know who I am, she can sing, and she recognizes songs.

Every time I visit her, we spend a good 30 minutes singing together, and she lights up with internal joy.

And you know where else music is important, outside of music in our personal lives?

Music in the church!

Music is usually one of the most controversial aspects of church life, and not surprisingly, music got some of the most comments during our visioning conversations.

People don't advocate for things they don't care about.

We know that music fuels our worship, our community. Almost all of our favorite events here in the life of the church include music.

When I plan weddings and funerals, you know what people usually care more about than any other part of the service?

The music.

Music resonates and reverberates within our souls and has a way of moving us emotionally and spiritually that words alone cannot.

Music also creates safe space.

You can't yell at people or spew insults or hatred rhetoric when you're singing.

I was lucky enough to only feel truly unsafe that one time in my life.

But other people, traditionally persecuted people, feel unsafe all the time, in many places in the world, even among their own families.

We think that just because we abolished slavery and Jim Crow laws and because same-sex marriage is legal in all 50 states that suddenly everyone is welcome everywhere.

But thinking that is blissful ignorance.



We have a corporate responsibility to work to create a world in which all people feel safe, everywhere.

Not only is this the call of the church, but even more so because sadly, it's people who call themselves Christians who spew hatred and intolerance.

And we have to be a louder voice than them, a voice that proclaims unconditional love and acceptance.

The way we feel warm and protected when we sing in our safe places, may we never give up our resolve to make sure the whole world becomes a safe sanctuary for all of God's people.

Because safety is a right, not a privilege. Amen.