

Remembering Injustice, Working For Justice

Some Reflections on the Mother Emanuel Martyr of the Church

--by Bishop Herman Yoos, South Carolina Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Today, June 18, 2017, is the Sunday closest to the second anniversary of the Mother Emanuel tragedy where nine African American brothers and sisters in Christ were gunned down during a Bible Study by a young, white male hoping to incite a race war.

Some might be tempted to ask, "Didn't our politicians unite to remove the Confederate Flag? Haven't there been significant efforts in this state since then to address our racial injustices and divisions and to work towards reconciliation? Isn't it time to simply move on?"

There are at least two compelling reasons for us today to continue to ponder the significance of this tragedy in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The first is that white supremacist groups across the nation and in this state are continuing to churn out vitriol on the internet seeking to influence others with the poison of racial hatred.

In February of this year, the South Carolina State Newspaper headlines were, "SC Man Planned Attack in the Spirit of Dylan Roof." Before his arrest, this 29-year-old white supremacist named Benjamin McDowell was quoted, "If I could, I would do something on a big scale and write on the building, 'In the Spirit of Dylan Roof'."

Heidi Beirich of the Southern Poverty Law Center in the same article writes, "*The fact is 85% of domestic terrorist attacks in recent years have been committed by whites with beliefs like McDowell and Roof.*"

The truth is that the sin of racism and prejudice is still alive and well in this state and not just among white extremists, but it impacts all of us including our schools, public institutions and our churches as well, which is why 11:00 on Sunday morning is still the most segregated time in America.

Author Drew Hart in his book, The Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism writes, "*Many whites think that racism is only about KKK-like behavior . . . and therefore they are always on the lookout for the "bad racists" to scapegoat. Many refuse to think about the larger racialized patterns of society that share individual's ideologies and habits.*"

Yet there is a second and even more compelling reason for us to remember and honor these nine lives today on this anniversary and that is because of the words of grace and forgiveness that were spoken to the shooter in court only two days later by the families of those who were martyred.

The daughter of Ethel Lance said, "*I forgive you. You took something really precious away from me. I will never be able to talk to her again . . . but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgives you and I forgive you.*"

Anthony Thompson, representing the family of Myra Thompson, spoke these words, "*I forgive you, my family forgives you. We would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Give your life to the one who matters most, Christ, so he can change your ways no matter what happens to you, you'll be ok.*"

And every family member who testified that day said similar words. In an unforgettable act their words of forgiveness and grace became a huge wave of God's reconciling love that washed over our state and nation. People in the streets of Charleston, young and old, black and white, began hugging one another and praying together. Thousands of others held hands across the Arthur Ravenel, Jr. Bridge as if to say, "Enough is enough!" It is time to build bridges of respect and understanding that will stretch across every chasm of division in our society!

Former Governor David Beasley said, "*If anyone had the right to be vengeful, it was these families. But in 24 hours, they displayed the most powerful weapon in the history of the world: unconditional love.*"

Now if we turn to Paul's letter to the Romans in Chapter 5, we find the source of this outpouring of God's unconditional love. "*Therefore since we are justified by faith we have peace through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand . . . And not only that but we also boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces character, and character*

produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

As we know, Paul is no stranger to unfair suffering nor to the power of the Holy Spirit to work in and through such suffering. In 2 Corinthians 11, he writes, *"Five times I have received the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was ship wrecked. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."* Clearly Paul understands the human tendency to despair and doubt in the face of intense hardship and affliction; but at the same time he also knows that God's grace, hope and love is more than sufficient to sustain us in such moments because Christ Jesus poured out his life for us and for the sins of the world on the cross.

This past January, a group of about 60 ELCA Bishops who were at a conference in Charleston visited Mother Emanuel to pay their respects and to pray for these nine families. After an excellent presentation by the Church Historian, one of the bishops said to him how amazed and deeply moved we all were by the forgiveness show by these nine families. His comment to us was, *"Why were you Bishops so amazed? Hasn't Jesus our Lord been teaching us for over 2,000 years about the power of forgiveness? Isn't it about time for us to be practicing what he has been teaching us?"*

In other words, he was suggesting that all of us who have faith and trust in Jesus Christ should be willing and expected to demonstrate to those around us every day the power of forgiveness. We should not see this as something extraordinary or unusual to do. It is in the DNA of our baptisms to forgive.

Perhaps our problem is that we have become so accustomed to holding onto grudges and resentments until they harden like concrete in our hearts and weigh us down. After all that is our sinful nature that prefers getting even to forgiving and prefers punishing or avoiding those who hurt us the most. It is so much easier to lose our tempers and to blame others for our short comings rather than to first examine our own conscience and then extend words of forgiveness and grace to others.

It is no wonder that Jesus said in the 5th chapter of Matthew, *"When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift."* Or again in the 18th chapter of Matthew, Jesus is asked by Peter, *"How many times must I forgive a brother or a sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?"* Jesus understands a different kind of math when it comes to God's forgiveness and answers, *"No Peter – not seven times, but 7 times 70,"* or an unlimited amount beyond all human tendency to keep score.

A year ago last June, Presiding Elder Norvel Goff was preaching a sermon in the Columbia Convention Center to the South Carolina Synod Assembly. There he said, *"These words of forgiveness for the shooter of their loved ones did not come from their mouths all by themselves, but rather these words came from God who was speaking in them and through them to all of us. Anytime someone forgives another person of a deep hurt or profound wrong, God releases a wave of energy that creates transformation and new possibilities out of things we could not possibly conceive of producing new life."*

To say it differently, forgiveness is never something that we muster up all by our own will power and strength, but rather forgiveness flows from the heart of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit into our hearts bringing new possibilities for the future. Long before we ever speak words of forgiveness and grace to others, we are first forgiven and freed from our bondage to sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which opens up the possibility of extending this same free gift of forgiveness to others.

Another AME Presiding Elder Joe Darby, from Charleston, recently talked about the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in our culture today. *"If we are to be the church and address the sinful racial and cultural division that runs rampant in our world, we have to be the church and reach out to those who are not like us. We have to go out of our way to sit down at the table of understanding with those we don't know and may not trust. We have to build new relationships, even if doing so shakes our long-held assumptions. We have to face up to uncomfortable questions of privilege and power and walk in the shoes of the powerless. We have to embrace ways and means of getting to "know" each other instead of just "knowing of each other," and do so in an air of mutual respect."*

When I was a child, I heard stories about Christian Martyrs who were set on fire, who were crucified upside down, or who were attacked by lions in the arena. My child-like faith couldn't conceive of what that kind of suffering might be like. Neither could I understand at that age why these martyred saints still matter to our Christian witness today. It seemed like all that martyrdom stuff was forever stuck in the past as a distant memory of church history.

But then on June 17, 2015, when the Rev. Clementa Pinckney and Rev. Daniel Simmons and the Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton were shot and killed along with Cynthia Hurd, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor and Myra Thompson while attending a Bible Study on the sower and the seed, I began to grasp the incredible costly witness of all the martyrs

over the ages. I began to realize that dying for one's faith in Jesus Christ still happens today and that somehow we are connected to their lives and are being taught the kind of love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ that "*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.*" This is the kind of love that never ends. This kind of forgiveness has no limits placed upon it.

So as we stand today at this 2-year remembrance, the invitation we have from God is to not to harden our hearts towards those we disagree with. It is not to hold onto grudges and resentments in our family or with our co-workers and acquaintances. It is not to shrug our shoulder in apathy about the racial struggle and injustices we still witness today. Rather God invites us to surrender, to let go, to give into God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ so that we may become instruments of God's reconciling peace in our hurting world.

You are invited to join now in a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

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