

EMANUEL NINE ANNIVERSARY SERMON

The Rt. Rev Andrew Waldo, Bishop
The Episcopal Diocese of Upper South Carolina



“There are no shortcuts to maturity.”

In a world that demands sound bites instead of nuance, saying that “there are no shortcuts to maturity” goes against the grain. It resists the pressure that surrounds us to choose sides quickly, to be perfectly consistent in every principle or belief. On/off, black/white, yes/no seem to be the kinds of answers urgently demanded of today’s leaders by the various media and power brokers.

The truth is, that when it comes to life in Christ—to our life as disciples—there are no shortcuts ... things take time. The good news is that along the way there are many glimpses of growth in Christian knowledge, character and action. Indeed, the past few years have given us some powerful glimpses of Christian maturity.

Floods ravaged the midlands and low country of SC in 2015, and people by the thousands set aside the busy-ness of their own lives to offer help wherever it was needed. Some whose homes were destroyed accepted their new normal, trusting that God would be with them, as scripture tells us. Both action and trust can be important signs of Christian maturity. And Christians in significant numbers have been on both the giving and receiving ends of discipleship in action these past three years. The plethora of hurricanes in 2017 has brought people together, trusting in God and each other. Even witnessing sacrificial faithfulness teaches us important things, and helps us deepen our growth and maturity as disciples. We have many among us for whom to be grateful.

But it still takes time for us to integrate lessons learned into our own Christian discipleship, something that will be true throughout our lives.

The families of the nine Charleston Christians—shot to death while in Bible study on June 17, 2015—gave us an astonishing glimpse of sacrificial faithfulness when they confronted the shooter in court, —and forgave him. Their rejection of the need for retribution and their ability to forgive came from deep and long-formed discipleship; and the power of their act resounded throughout the world. Here in South Carolina, the shooting at Mother Emanuel called us to confront the patterns or practice of racial hatred that fed Dylann Roof’s violence. It called us to new depths of self-examination, repentance and reconciliation. Each of us found ourselves asking some form of the question, “Could I have forgiven Dylann Roof if he had shot my child, my grandmother, my brother, my father, my sister, my friend?”

In 2016, during a dialogue filmed by SCETV for its documentary, *A Seat at the Table*, one African-American woman expressed her disbelief that these families could really forgive so soon after the shooting, that they must have done so out of their shock and numbness. After all, they had not yet gone through all the stages of grief, she said. In response, the Rev. Joe Darby, who was at the time the Presiding Elder of the AME Church, Beaufort District, said something to this effect: “They forgave the shooter because forgiveness is at the heart of their Christian faith and discipleship. Their forgiveness was a result of their faith and discipleship.”

—For the rest of us, it was a glimpse of transcendently mature Christian discipleship.

There is a long Christian history of saints and ordinary disciples who have so trusted the message that in Christ, “death no longer has dominion” (Romans 6:9), that some, gladly gave their lives for Jesus’ sake and the sake of the Gospel. Such disciples know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39). They know that God’s love empowers us to confront the evils of this world truly without fear. This is the kind of glimpse we got from those at “Mother” Emanuel AME Church who welcomed a stranger with a different skin color into their Bible study, and from their families who would later forgive that stranger for his unspeakable act of hatred and violence.

This is the kind of discipleship that grows over time in hearts focused on love and in minds formed by gratitude.

Ignatius of Antioch (whose feast day is in October) was martyred in the early 2nd century. He was one of the five Apostolic Fathers and was said to have been a disciple of John the Apostle and Evangelist. The Episcopal Church’s book of remembrances, known as Holy Women, Holy Men, tells us that Ignatius

had a profound sense of two ends—his own [life’s end], and the consummation of history in Jesus Christ. In ecstasy, he saw his impending martyrdom as the fitting conclusion to a long episcopate. He was accounted the second Bishop of Antioch in Syria.

Seven authentic letters which Ignatius wrote to Churches while he journeyed across Asia Minor in the custody of ten soldiers ... give valuable insights into the life of the early Church.

Ignatius maintained that the Church’s unity would always spring from that liturgy by which all are initiated into Christ through Baptism. He exhorted: “Try to gather more frequently to celebrate God’s Eucharist and to praise him ... At these meetings you should heed the bishop and presbytery attentively and break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality ... “

During the Emperor Domitian’s persecution of Christians, Ignatius, as bishop and leader of the fledgling, but growing church in Antioch, was ultimately taken into custody by Roman soldiers and transported to Rome where he was martyred in the Flavian Amphitheater by wild beasts. During this journey, Ignatius wrote his Letter to the Romans, in which he reflects on his impending martyrdom with a deep peacefulness and joy about what he will go through in witness to Christ. He looks so eagerly toward his eternal union with Christ that he even discourages his Christian brothers and sisters in Rome from trying to prevent his martyrdom. He is the earliest known writer to use the word “catholic” in reference to the church as “universal.” And he’s the one we’re remembering when we “sing a song of the saints of God:”

—And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
And one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
And there’s not any reason, no, not the least,
Why I shouldn’t be one too.

These glimpses of mature discipleship are at once very different and very similar. The Charleston martyrs were accounted by Dylann Roof “as sheep to be slaughtered.” The power of their witness was in their undefended hearts, their open welcome to the unknown. The power of their families’ forgiveness was in its astonishing trust in God’s love above human inclinations to blame and for vengeance. The power of Ignatius’ martyrdom was in his foreknowledge that by his willingness to die for Jesus’ sake, the authority of Roman power and might would be diminished. In every glimpse, we discover individuals unrulled by fear.

The question they lay at our feet is therefore more like, “How can I so walk the way of Christ that all fear within is banished, that at any moment in any circumstance, I can truly ‘come with joy to meet my Lord?’” “How can I first ‘die’ to fear and then keep myself from ever again falling back again in slavery to that same fear?”

In the SCETV studios, that’s what the Rev. Joe Darby was saying about the families of the Charleston Martyrs. He described their forgiveness as an offering by individuals so transformed by the love of God in Christ Jesus, that fear or retribution could have no place in their hearts.

—So what, then, is our call in the presence of this martyrdom and the astonishing act of forgiveness offered by those it most closely affected?

The SC Bishops Public Education Initiative, an ecumenical effort of the Fellowship of SC Bishops advocates for children from SC’s most impoverished families. It also asks Christians like us to consider committing ourselves as individuals to an extended period of tutoring and mentoring children in a public school. It’s not difficult to imagine the hesitation in the hearts of many people about this. “I don’t know how to tutor. I don’t know that neighborhood or those teachers or those children. People who live in the inner city or in poor, rural areas scare me. I don’t know those people. I don’t feel safe there.” The truth is, we must never choose to isolate ourselves from poverty.

Since the Charleston massacre, the Public Education Initiative has taken on broader dimensions. Which means that putting faith before our fears has a new and persistent urgency. South Carolina’s public education deficits most overwhelmingly affect the state’s African-American population. They cast thousands of citizens of color out of the running to improve their economic opportunities. It’s hard to say whether education solutions are more about race or about economics. It is most certainly about justice. But the Charleston shootings have highlighted the racial dimensions in many aspects of our common life. Considering the depth, breadth and intensity of the history of race relations in America, the word “reconciliation” implies vast and complicated work.

—A few of you have lived your whole life attending one church. Most of you have attended several, and virtually all of us have visited many. The fundamental question that pretty much any visitor or newcomer has when attending a church for the first time is this: Can I, do I, will I belong here? We ask it because the need to belong lies at the root of human nature, and we feel it in every arena of our lives—in church, at home, at work and in our play.

To belong is to have an honored name, home, and relationship. It is to be known and loved for who you are. It is about knowing gracious welcome, warm fellowship and deep friendship. It is about knowing blessed comfort and unsolicited aid. Belonging is also about having mentors and teachers. It is about trust in goodwill and fairness, shared in common among the many. And it is embedded in our faith: as St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome only a 50 or so years

before Ignatius did, “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption.” (Romans 8:23) Our inward groaning is for God. It is about belonging.

And yet, not one of us in this room, no matter who we are, has been spared the feeling of “not belonging” at some point and maybe even at many points in our lives. There is however a fundamental difference between being able to walk out of a situation in which we feel we don’t belong, and being stuck in a system that constantly tells us all the places and ways we don’t belong.

But we, here, are sisters and brothers in Christ. Whatever our differences may be, we belong together. Even the stranger belongs among us. We do ask ourselves along the way, “Can I, do I, will I belong?” The move toward Christian maturity changes that question slightly to another one: How can I, do I, will I help you to belong? Whether you are black, white, brown, gay, straight, rich, poor, of limited ability, deeply gifted, conservative, progressive, educated, or illiterate.

—How will we help others to belong?

Martyrs, like Ignatius of Antioch, teach us what it means utterly to let go of fear—large and small. But letting go of fear does not necessarily mean literally giving your life. It does mean getting out of your comfort zone. It does mean taking risks to invite, welcome, share power with, love, teach and mentor others especially those *among whom* you feel you don’t belong, or whom you feel don’t belong among you and “your people,” however you define them.

There are no shortcuts to Christian maturity. Discipleship is costly. “Those who love their life,” Jesus said, “will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

Into this discipleship, we were baptized. And together with St. Paul, Ignatius, Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson, you and I are called to be witnesses. Witnesses to the saving love of God in Christ Jesus.