

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost 7B  
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And Jesus said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

Those are the words from Mark's gospel that the Mother Emmanuel AME Church Bible Study discussed for an hour on Wednesday night before Dylann Roof, who had been part of the conversation for that hour, shot nine of them dead.

The horror of this event is amplified by that bit of context. The fact that the killer spent an hour in conversation about scripture with his victims ought, in our imaginations, to have changed the outcome. And sometimes that kind of thing does. Listening to the people you hate, spending time with them, can bend hatred

into something better. Certainly listening to and reflecting upon the Word of God can accomplish that. But this time, you might say, the word fell on rocky soil.

In the time since the news about the horrific, terrifying events of last Wednesday came out, people have been struggling with the story. Struggling with their own grief and outrage. Struggling to give voice to their compassion and sorrow.

Struggling to do something, anything, that will make a difference. And struggling to control the story.

In the days after the murders, public figures of every stripe have been telling us that this has nothing to do with, or everything to do with race, and gun violence, and flags and teen angst and a so-called war on religion. And others have blamed those people for politicizing a tragedy, or for ignoring the political reality of the tragedy. Some have even blamed the victims for their own deaths in furtherance of their own agendas.

And why all of this spinning? I think the simple answer is that this is an event from which everyone wants to create some kind of distance. We need to believe that we are different from both the perpetrator and the victims in order to feel safe. And we want to find a way to make sure that whatever changes come in response, those changes don't undermine our own lives, values, and, yes, agendas.

The trouble is, we can't really do that.

As tempting as it is to see Roof as a lone, deranged teen, not reflective of or the product of society as a whole, the fact is that he wasn't born hating, he wasn't born a racist, he wasn't born a killer. He learned the ideas and values that inspired him to kill. And whether he learned them at home or in his community or on the internet, the truth is that when he sought to validate those beliefs, validation was easy to find. On the internet, in bar rooms and street corners, and on a flagpole in front of the state capitol.

But voices to contradict his prejudice and fear and loathing of those he saw as different from him were not as loud or as widespread or as compelling. Because too many of us, in response to the hatred that is spread wide in our country, are too often silent. We are afraid, or we don't want to get involved, or we rely on others to speak for us, or we just don't know what to say.

Our gospel lesson for today is from another part of Mark. In it, the disciples are on a boat in the middle of a tempest that threatens to overwhelm and drown them, and Jesus is fast asleep. When he awakens, the disciples cry out to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

It seems to me, if we are to have any hope at all of fulfilling the calling we celebrate in our Communion meal of being the body of Christ in the world, we must hear those words as directed to us. "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

That is a cry that comes to us from every direction. From the endangered creatures

of the creation that God gave over to our care. From the children of our cities, underfed and undereducated and surrounded by and caught up in violence. From the poor of our and every land, dying from preventable disease and lack of basic necessities. To those persecuted for their faith or their heritage or their affections in every corner of the world. And from those nine people who, because of the color of their skin, found no safety even in the sanctuary of their church.

We are called not just to care that they are perishing, but to still the waters that endanger them. To speak out against injustice and hatred and cruelty in every form until it is hard, not easy, for people to find voices to support and encourage their hate. And we don't need to be afraid, because Jesus tells us that if we decide to speak out, the Spirit of God will give us the words.

But we are called to do more than just speak, but also to do justice, and love mercy as we humbly walk with God. Our love must not only be heard, but seen in the land, if the world is to be changed. And if we decide to act, God's Spirit will also guide us.

Let us pray.

Loving God,

We commend to your care the souls of Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd , Susie Jackson , Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra

Thompson. Welcome them into the safety of your eternal home. Let your light shine upon them even more brightly than your light shone through them.

And as we remember them, save us from the sin of silence in the face of injustice and hatred, in the world and in our daily lives. And as their families have honored their memory with the grace of forgiveness, let us seek that same grace in all that we do, so that love, at last, will guide and govern all. We pray for all who are victims of hate, and for those who live in the fear that terrorism inspires. And we pray for Dylann Roof and all who perpetrate acts of violence and hate, that their hearts may, by your grace, be turned toward you. In Jesus' name we pray,  
Amen.