

A Calming Presence

Mark 4:35-41

When 21-year-old Dylann Storm Roof entered the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, last Wednesday night, we know that those who had gathered for the weekly prayer meeting and Bible Study welcomed him with open arms into their company. Although they were a predominately African-American congregation, on regular occasion, folks of all colors and backgrounds visit this historic church for its legacy in the African-American heritage and for the powerful preaching and singing that still rise up through the Gothic-style rafters, week after week for generations.

Last Wednesday, by custom, members were gathered in an adjacent room for their weekly prayer meeting—a time much less formal and lengthy than their typical three-hour Sunday morning service. Since the young man who had come to their door had asked specifically for the pastor, he was graciously ushered in and seated next to the one who, some thought, might help save his impoverished soul.

It should have been a “come to Jesus” moment. Apparently, according to his later confession, Roof actually thought twice about his intended “mission” because people were so kind to him. Those gathered may have thought this first-time visitor had come off the streets, like many others, searching for something that would give him hope—a port in any storm for a lost child of God. “Mother Emmanuel” had witnessed many of them for nearly 200 years as one of the oldest black churches in America, widely known for redeeming hopeless people on the margins of life from the days of the

underground railroad to the present. Perhaps, so close to Father's Day, the young man was welcomed into this safe and warmly-spirited place like a prodigal son returning home from his wayward folly. He could have come that evening to finally make his peace with God.

Instead, after about an hour of group singing, intercessory prayer, and listening to Pastor Clementa Pinckney expound on the Scriptures, this prodigal soul revealed his contempt for redemption: "I have to do it," he exclaimed, "You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go!" His racist intentions declared, Roof pulled out the .45 caliber pistol that reportedly was a recent birthday present and callously murdered the pastor and eight others who had befriended him, stopping only to reload several times—an act as brutally vicious, cold-hearted, and senseless as the Sandy Hook massacre or the slaughter of Amish schoolchildren at Nickel Mines.

Any sane, compassionate, conscientious person has to recoil at the shocking nature of such violence, but for black communities and churches it is part of their historic suffering. It comes as yet another recent assault upon the African-American population in this country that already has suffered through so many injustices related to police profiling and brutality. And this horrific crime was expressly intended to incite racial hatred—something that was likely cultivated in a social environment which fosters the type of deep-rooted bigotry evident in Roof's confession and profile. But he's no lone ranger. He is merely the product of so much in our society that not only tolerates strident racism and hatred, but feeds and glorifies it.

Understandably, you and I grieve for the victims and the church itself, not only for the loss of family, friends, and pastors, but because their sanctuary will forever be defined by this heinous crime. Some of us may even sense the vulnerability that comes when any religious community welcomes in a stranger. Sanctuaries are not necessarily a sanctuary from the violations of this world. Comparatively speaking, in our present time, Muslims experience far more violence than just about any other religious community, with suicide bombers entering mosques all over the world; certainly, Jews historically share a similar story having been targeted in their own homes, businesses, and houses of worship, as well.

Though Christians are persecuted in various places around the world, typically black churches are the prime targets in this country. So this morning, as an act of solidarity, folks of many faiths and traditions will be joining the Rev. Florence Clarke and her congregation at the Clarke Memorial AME Zion Church on Belden St. in New London for their Sunday worship, beginning at 11:00 a.m.— Florence having grown up around the corner from Mother Emanuel in Charleston and feeling the loss personally. If you'd like to join them, there will be ample time; I can assure you, their worship will last well past noon.

I find, though, this tragedy is hard to respond to—not because I lack the will, but because it seems as though what needs to change are things that we've been addressing for decades. It's not like we haven't been here before. Many of us have spent our entire adult lives speaking out or trying to end racism, militarism, sexism, and the inherent nihilism of our violence-crazed world. But there's no end to

it, and responding to each hate crime or mass killing becomes tiresome and overwhelming. For that reason, we're resigned to more needless violence and tragedy bringing us to tears, no matter what we do. It's hard not to become hopeless—full of despair and even jaded about the prospects for meaningful change. Fighting racism and injustice is like shouldering the proverbial boulder of Sisyphus—we're constantly pushing these monstrous problems uphill, struggling to make progress, only to continually fall back down to square one. That's what it feels like this week.

For that reason, it's critically important to ground ourselves in some calming presence that provides inspiration and perspective so we can summon the energy and drive to keep our “eyes on the prize.” At the same time, it's vital for us to see that healing the world of its ills is a long-term divine project of which we are only temporary laborers for a time. The calming presence many of us seek is the Spirit of Jesus to speak to us through insights from Scripture or in meditation and prayer where we can unwind ourselves from the anger, fears, and impatience tying us up in knots—emotional reactions that often cloud our judgments or lead to despair.

Frequently, I also turn to some of my heroes in the faith to help me sense a calming presence. One of Martin Luther King Jr.'s lasting legacies are his words and quotes that have become like sacred truths to me, such as:

- *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that;”*
- *“Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle;”*

- *“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter;”*
- *“Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness;”*
- *“I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear;”*
- *“If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward;”*
- *“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope;”* and,
- *“We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”*

We certainly are in the same boat now and, like Jesus’ disciples, so many of us have been fighting the harsh and threatening elements for so long, we’re weary and we’re beginning to fear all is lost.

Needless to say, I have been drawn into this morning’s text from Mark for what it symbolizes in this time and in this nation. It’s a word many of us need to hear this morning. It’s about surviving and finding our way through turbulent waters and buffeting winds, recognizing we are all in the same boat. Regardless of where one is located in it, what impacts one affects the survival of all; when harm is done to one, eventually, it will violate everyone. When one suffers, we all suffer. We are all in the same boat fighting racism, injustice, and everything that threatens our common survival and wellbeing.

To be honest, it’s not the traditional interpretation of this story that speaks to me today—the one that places all the emphasis on Jesus as a wonder-worker—as a cosmic superhero saving the day. He

wakes up and commands all the bad things to go away. That's not going to happen! Life doesn't operate that way.

So the focus, I believe, belongs on those in the boat. These were fishermen familiar with the waters and the darkness, since after sunset is when they normally cast their nets. So they knew what they were getting into when they left the shore. It was life as they knew it, day by day. Jesus didn't promise to protect them from what experience, common sense, and timeless wisdom should have already taught them. When you're out on the waters of life in the darkest hour, be prepared for the storms that rise up and do what you should to work together to secure your safety.

The same thing holds true for us in these times. We can fall on our knees in times of crisis and pray that God will save us from such senseless violence, but that won't do any good if we don't use common sense and wisdom to work on correcting problems. We don't need a miracle to figure out how to combat racism and gun violence and all the other ills of our society. We already know what it is that feeds hateful minds and hearts! We already know that if we glorify violence in our culture and media, and then ease restrictions on access to guns, we will have more gun violence in our nation—much of it committed by those with immature, ignorant minds!

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if people are not taught moral wisdom or respect, or how to be team players, or to embrace and value racial and cultural differences, or if they've never learned how to address conflicts constructively, or learned how to forgive grievances done against them, then we will live in a harsh,

survivalist world. That's when the storms rise up suddenly in the night with winds and waves that overwhelm us.

At the same time, we need to keep things in perspective and remember, these tragic events do not have to define us or this country. Human civilization is not like the extremists and terrorists want to portray it. As much of a national sorrow this tragedy has been, those who terrorize others with senseless violence are rare—the Dylann Roof of the world are not as influential as they seek to be. They are a cruel, warped, vicious anomaly in society. We cannot (and will not) easily protect ourselves from sheer madness.

Thus, there will always be times of crisis when all the skills that we possess, all the things we possibly could do have been done, and violence still rises up leaving tragedy in its wake. Those are the days of sorrow and fear that we presently are in, and where we must personally and collectively draw upon the strength of God, however the divine presence is known throughout the world's great traditions—the divine Spirit who will calm our fears, comfort our sorrows, strengthen our resolve, and help us to step up again and take our place alongside others to help save our fragile boat. That's a marvelous calming presence that many of us know of and experience personally, especially when our own reserves have run out. We turn to God for help and hope. We find that everpresent help in prayer and reflection, sometimes in solitary silence, sometimes in communal sharing. God's calming Presence is always there to quiet our anxious fretting and our fears, saying to us, "Peace, be still," even as we await the moment when the winds and the waves will cease.

This morning, I would well imagine, that those who are gathered at Mother Emanuel, member and visitor alike, sense that Jesus is very much in their boat as a calming presence. They will sense the strength they need to carry on, to forgive this troubled young man for their own sake as much as his. They will sing great songs of the faith that remind them that God is always near and very much with them and among them this day. They will know that it will take God's love and mercy to bring light to their own hearts and community, and it will take their light to brighten the mourning landscape of Charleston. They will demonstrate to the world the great witness of the Gospel—that hate is too great a burden to bear and bitterness a temptation that corrodes their spirit. They will not remain silent about these things that matter, and they will accept their momentary disappointment and sorrow, because they know that hope is infinite and love continually transforms the world.

The legacy of this grand place of spiritual formation will be greater than it has ever been. It will be a monument to the truth that love overcomes hate and light will dawn upon the darkness. And those who hate its light and its witness will be forced back into the shadows of their own hellish misery.

We must join these broken-hearted, yet strong-spirited, saints of Charleston in their quest to not simply be victims of someone's evil. We must continue to do the good work of addressing racism and injustice in our society and throughout the world, testifying that black lives, and all lives, matter!

We must take up our place on this boat we share in order to do our part to keep everyone on board moving forward through the

storms of every night until the dawn of the new day reveals at last the safety of that beautiful, peaceful shore.

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