

Peace in the Storm

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7, Year B – Mark 4:35-41

Gary Eichelberger – Christ Church Greenville – June 21, 2015

In the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Those were the words that the disciples spoke to the slumbering Jesus – as they saw their lives threatened by a great windstorm out on the Sea of Galilee – as violent waves battered their boat and it appeared that the sea would swallow them – all the while their teacher slept. And so they woke him with a plea:

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

I realized some time ago that I would be preaching on Father’s Day today. But, as I sat down to prepare this sermon on Thursday morning, I couldn’t help but think of two children whose Father’s Day had just been devastated.

Their father, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, had been killed – along with eight other individuals – Cynthia Hurd, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Depayne Middleton Doctor, Daniel Simmons, and Myra Thompson. They were killed as Reverend Pinckney led a Bible study at his church – at their church – Emanuel AME Church in Charleston – Mother Emanuel Church.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

From what we now know about the horrible acts of this past Wednesday, a young white man decided to commit an act of terrorism against our black brothers and sisters in Christ—and went into Mother Emanuel Church that evening and did just that.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Two thousand years ago, in the midst of that violent sea that threatened to engulf them, the disciples turned to Jesus – the very Body of Christ in their midst. And he woke from his slumber—having stayed with them through the storm—and he heard their cries.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

And he did care. So he calmed the storm with the word, “**Peace.**”

We, as the Church, are called to be the Body of Christ in the world today. We are to demonstrate the presence of Christ—who is always present with us—who never leaves the boat.

As Christ's Body, we are the ones who are called upon to be a presence that will offer calm in the midst of the storm. We are the ones who are to respond to the chaos with "Peace." It is the same "Peace" with which we will greet one another in a few moments. The Peace that Jesus gave to his disciples after he conquered death and rose again. This is the Peace that we have to offer.

So, just as the disciples asked Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" The question must be put to us—as the Body of Christ here in the midst of the 21st Century, here in South Carolina:

"Beloved, do you not care that your brothers and sisters in Christ are perishing?"

If we do care, we must wake from our slumber. If we truly are who we say we are, we must meet hate and violence with Peace.

One way to meet hate with Peace is to recognize our own responsibility for the conditions that create and foster hatred. We can look to a long history of violent racism that has plagued our state and our region for centuries. We can identify the large and small ways that we have failed to reckon with the severity, the depth, and the horror of that legacy.

Many of us – myself included – have ancestors who were deeply complicit in that violent history. But many of us would like to think that the horror of that history is far removed from this present world—that we are no longer tainted by those crimes and terrors. But, as the events of this past week—as well as other events of recent months—have demonstrated, we are not so removed.

"Do we not care that our brothers and sisters are perishing?"

One way to meet violence with Peace is to refuse the temptation to place our faith in violence as the only effective means to respond. Faced with similar forms of violence—and the temptation to respond violently, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., expounded upon Christ's admonition to turn to the other cheek by explaining, "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

We can also look to the means – to the tools of violence that empowered this young man to terrorize those who were peacefully gathered in the name of Christ. And we can question—we can question whether our culture needs to rethink our unfettered commitment to certain instruments of violence—to consider whether we have made something hallowed that should not be so.

"Do we not care that our brothers and sisters are perishing?"

In the midst of this tragedy, some of the most powerful and most difficult words of Peace have already been uttered. And we can find great hope in those words. They have come from the families of the victims – folks who lost sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. On Friday afternoon during the bond hearing that took place in Charleston and was broadcast on multiple media outlets, several family members were already offering words of forgiveness to the one who was responsible for their loss—even going so far as to ask for God’s mercy upon him.

And then, the sister of one victim, her voice trembling with a powerful combination of sorrow and rage, began by thanking the others who had already spoken before her – those who spoke of forgiveness – “for not allowing hate to win.” She then admitted, “But me I’m a work in progress, and I acknowledge that I am very angry.” Nonetheless, she knew that for her sister’s sake she would “have to forgive” despite her righteous anger.

We are all works in progress—and much good work has already been done—but we have much work to do in identifying and confronting the twin demons of racism and violence that have haunted our culture for far too long.

Too many of our brothers and sisters are perishing.

It is time to wake up—and offer Peace to the storm.

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