

A Killing Storm

Text:

Mark 4:35-41

A sermon preached by
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On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”



My brother was killed this week.

While leading a Bible study group among part of our family which gathers and worships in a building in another city my brother lay dead bleeding from a wound created by a handgun that a father gave his son as a gift.

Your brother was shot and killed this week.

Your brother, my brother, our brother—along with 8 other of our brothers and sisters – were shot with a handgun and left to die around our family table which we had set aside for our search for a deeper relationship with God and one another.

Emanuel African American Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, Wednesday night, June 17, 2015.

- The Honorable Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41 years old
- Cynthia Hurd, 54 years old
- Ethel Lance, 70 years old
- Tywanza Sanders, 26 years old
- Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, 49 years old
- Rev. Sharonda Singleton, 45 years old
- Rev. Daniel Simmons Sr., 74 years old
- Myra Thompson, 59 years old
- Susie Jackson, 87 years old

“When the storms of life are raging, stand by me ...” Dr. Charles Tindley’s great hymn reminds us of the truth of today’s Gospel lesson. A windstorm had swept across the Sea of Galilee and Jesus’ disciples were afraid that they would be tossed from the boat. Jesus was asleep on a cushion at the rear of the boat and they woke him so that he could comfort them. “Don’t you care, Jesus? Don’t you care that we’re all going to die?”

“Stop worrying,” he says. “Don’t be anxious,” he says. “Why are you afraid,” he says. “Have you no faith,” he says. “Calm down,” he says. And to the very storm itself, he commands, “Peace! Be Still!” And the wind and sea listen to him.

“When the storms of life are raging, stand by me ...”

Why am I afraid? I’m afraid and anxious and angry and outraged because 9 of my brothers and sisters were killed by a storm that threatens us daily. Yet we are clearly not yet ready to ask God to calm the storm. We are still reeling and tossing to and fro and we are not yet scared enough to call on God who is calm and non-anxious right here in the same boat with us. It seems that we’d

rather just wring our hands and hold our heads and say “woe is me” and claim there’s not much we can do.

Racism is storming around us. And those of you whose skin tone is similar to mine? It’s our fault that it still exists. It is, by definition, a white problem. This storm tosses our boat around yet we’re not yet afraid enough to call an end to it. This storm continues to batter us from every direction yet we still hold onto the mast for our dear lives rather than letting it come to an end and let the calm take over.

Nine of our brothers and sisters died this week. What does race have to do with it? Everything.

The Wall Street Journal announced that institutional racism is dead so this wasn’t about race. "What causes young men such as Dylann Roof to erupt in homicidal rage, whatever their motivation, is a problem that defies explanation beyond the reality that evil still stalks humanity."

“Whatever their motivation” ??? You’ve got to be kidding. Did we not hear the words of this killer as he took 9 lives from us? Witnesses said the gunman stood up and said he was there “to shoot black people... You’ve raped our women, and you are taking over the country ... I have to do what I have to do.”

Presidential candidates don’t want to talk about race.

One said that he didn’t know “what was on the mind or heart of the man who committed these atrocious crimes. I do know —I do know what was in the heart of the victims. They were meeting in brotherhood and sisterhood in that church.” (Bush) How can you possibly claim to know the heart of those who died but not know the mind of he who killed when he clearly announced his reason?

Another said, “Laws can’t change this. Only the good will and love of the American people can let folks know that an act like this is unacceptable.” (Jindal)

One called it yet another drug-induced “accident” that gave President Obama a platform to call for taking away all guns. (Perry)

One said “I just think [it was] one of these whacked out kids. I don’t think it’s anything broader than that. It’s about a young man who is obviously twisted.” (Graham)

Another parroted the sentiment of the National Rifle Association’s sales pitch: “It sounds crass, but frankly the best way to stop a bad person with a gun is to have a good person with a weapon that is equal or superior to the one that he’s using.” (Huckabee)

Only one called it what it is – directly with no apologies. “The Charleston church killings are a tragic reminder of the ugly stain of racism that still taints our nation.” (Sanders)

We let it go on and on and on. You and me. White folk of good intention. We don’t want to acknowledge the storm that beats at our boat day after day after day. Why? Because we’re still hanging on to the socially constructed categories of race as if they are our only life preserver. If we let go, if we acknowledge that we’re afraid, if we let God calm the wind and the sea, who knows what might happen.

We don’t want to talk about it. No, not that we don’t *want* to talk about it, we simply *refuse* to talk about it. We pretend that racism is an occasional act that makes us again scratch our heads when the reality is that racism is not just an aberration – racism is the reality, racism is the norm, racism is the storm that we think protects us in our boat when in fact it is what will cause us to perish.

“I have black friends.”

Do you now? That’s nice.

“My sister is married to a black man.”

Okay.

“My neighbor is black.”

So what?

You know the script; we’ve each memorized our lines very well. They don’t make any of us less racist. In fact, just by saying them, it might just be acknowledging how deep our racism is embedded.

It is about race. It is about the battle flag of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, hanging high above the capitol building in the state where a 21 year old white man felt secure enough in his whiteness to walk into a church and take away 9 black lives. It is about race when a black man is choked to death for selling cigarettes on a street corner. It’s about race when a white cop wrestles to the ground a black teen girl in a bikini and kneels on her back because he somehow felt threatened. It’s about race when a 12 year old boy is shot dead within 12 seconds of a police cruiser pulling alongside him.

It’s about race ...

It’s about whiteness. Until we who claim that category can say it and own it and surrender it, it will always be about race.

You and I have white privilege. Period. A fact. A reality.

“Me? I don’t have any privilege. I just go about my days like everyone else. I don’t have anything special.”

Accept it. You and I have white privilege.

Peggy McIntosh, a tireless anti-racism activist has described white privilege as a knapsack that we carry and usually don’t even realize is there, “an invisible weightless knapsack of assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.”

Here is a clear example. Yesterday, my family and I were driving on I95 North, in a hurry to get home where I was scheduled to speak at an African American Church in West Philadelphia. We weren’t really watching closely how fast we were traveling. A Delaware State Trooper noticed our speed for us. Because of my knapsack, I had no fear of what might happen next.

I had just renewed my car registration but hadn’t printed the card out yet.

“Trooper, can I show you the card on my tablet?”

“Oh, thanks,” he said as he accepted my computer and looked it over, “This is great. How about your insurance?”

“Here’s an old card. Again, I don’t have the newest one printed yet.”

“Oh, that’s okay. Can you pull up the new one on your phone or your tablet? I just have to see the valid date.”

You see, I can feel safe in that exchange because of this knapsack. I just pull out the necessary tools and I’m safe and secure in my whiteness and in my world. Yet during the whole encounter I was realizing just how different it might have been if I didn’t look like I look.

I wasn't driving the car yesterday. A Latina, a woman of color, was driving – my wife, Lydia. How this might have been different if she were alone. Or if I were a young African American man driving that car.

Expired registration card, expired insurance card.

“No registration? No, I don't want to see your computer. Step out if the car and let's see your driver's license. Reach slowly to the glove box when you get the insurance card. Oh, you don't have a valid card?”

As we sat there I remembered my friend and colleague Rev. Greg Holston's story of a late night call from his young daughter who was forced to the ground by a police officer after getting pulled over and his fear and anxiety as he rushed from the house to go find her. I thought of those young black men in videos that we've seen week after week after week.

Racism is alive and it is the storm around us. The storm that is killing us.

This sermon isn't going to end racism. Yours and my individual relationships with people who identify racially different than us isn't going to end racism. It is a systematic, systemic storm of distrust and fear and greed and intolerance. Systematic and systemic. Individual decisions to relate to one another are beautiful as all relationships are beautiful and are what God calls us to. But those individual relationships aren't going to end this storm. Only systematic change, institutional change, perception change, full on societal change has any chance of ending it.

No, this sermon isn't going to end it. This attack on the black church in South Carolina isn't going to end it. This gun massacre and none of those that will come next – because they will keep happening – is going to end it. The cases of police brutality aren't going to end it. The over-incarceration of our black men isn't

going to end it. The presidential campaign and election isn't going to end it.

Racism is alive and it is deadly. Racism is alive and it's crashing down around us. Racism is alive and it's killing us.

It is not until *we* take it upon *ourselves* and cry "Save Lord, we are perishing" and when we surrender to God who can calm the storm within us and around us that the storm will begin to subside.

When we are ready, when we are prepared, when we realize that we are perishing – only then will we call on God and the storm will cease.

Amen.