

OUR CRY GOES UP, HOW LONG?

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach, VA 23452
June 21, 2015

I begin this morning with a letter sent out by our bishop on Friday.

“The recent killing of nine innocent members of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina represents the tragic convergence of three very serious social issues plaguing our county today: racism, gun violence, and inadequate mental health care - particularly for our young people.

Given the fact that the AME Church is historically rooted in our own Episcopal Church, I believe this event should be a wake-up call for all of us. I strongly encourage all parishes in the Diocese of Southern Virginia to be diligent in assuring that conversations are taking place on the local level around these serious social matters. I likewise encourage our parishes to be part of consciousness raising efforts that lay these matters before our respective local governments for the purpose of seeking solutions.

Most importantly, I ask all Episcopalians in Southern Virginia to be diligent in praying for the victims of Emanuel AME and their families, the City of Charleston, the perpetrator, Dylann Roof, and those through out the world who suffer from acts of violence.

*Faithfully,
The Rt. Rev. Holly Hollerith “*

I intend to begin just such a conversation this morning. Following the service I will be in the parish hall and would welcome your thoughts and reflections on the events and what I am about to say.

On Friday morning I sat in my study at church with a page of sermon thoughts that I had jotted down over the course of the week. I was debating between a sermon talking about what is the first of three weeks of readings from Mark that speak of the Kingship of Christ. I considered the message of David who shuns the traditional armor to face Goliath with the weapon of a shepherd, a slingshot and what that might suggest to us as we face how we approach our challenges today. Most of those thoughts were written prior to the Wednesday night shootings at a historic AME church in Charleston. There are times when events happen that require a complete rewrite of a sermon. A fresh look at the gospel and yes this week's gospel has something to say to us in light of this tragic and hate filled crime against innocent Americans of color.

I also found the Hymn “The Church's one foundation” going through my head on that morning. The hymn has a line; “yet saints there watch are keeping, their cry

goes up "How long?" and soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song."
Today I find myself hung up on the cry of the saints, "How long?"

How long will we as a country allow the ghosts of segregation and racism to haunt us? How long will we allow the hatred, violence and the oppression to continue? This summer has seemed to me a flashback into the days of my youth. I remember being 10 years old in the suburbs of Cleveland Ohio and watching the Glennville and Hough areas of the city go up in flames in the mid 60s several summers in a row. To be honest it really feels the same to me right now. It feels the same as when my junior high gym teacher the first African American hired by the Lakewood schools found that someone had planted a gun in his drawer in hopes of getting him fired because "we didn't want niggers teaching our kids" and that is a direct quote from a friend's parent. Have we learned nothing in the 50 years since?

The musical South Pacific has a song in it entitled "You've got to be taught to hate." Do any of you remember how controversial that song was? Somebody taught that young man to be a racist. Nobody is born a racist. Wendy and I bought a house in Shaker Heights when I started to teach in Solon so that our children would grow up in a world where they would not have to wait until college to be in class with a person of color like we. So that my boys would not have the bigoted experience that I had growing up in an all white world on the west side of Cleveland. I didn't want them to hear the racially tainted jokes that were told in the cafeteria at my school and on the street corner. Believe me the south has no monopoly on racism.

The line from today's gospel that has been running through my mind all week, but especially since Wednesday night is, "Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?" The disciples were terrified by the storm and it seemed to them that Jesus didn't care, wasn't aware of their distress. I read one blog that was an extended plea that basically said, "God don't you care about the mess we are in?"

Yes God cares. I think the shortest passage in the bible is appropriate, "Jesus wept" Jesus weeps and I weep when I get an email inviting me to a workshop on church safety and it turns out to be a workshop on how to arm and equip members of the church with sufficient weapons to gun down anyone who might try to shoot the church up. Oh yes I received that invitation and the workshop was last summer at a hotel down on the oceanfront. This event was organized and publicized to all the churches in the area by a member of the Virginia Beach police department acting without the chief's knowledge. Needless to say after I contacted the chief and the mayor I got apologies from all including the detective who sent the email and organized the event, but the event went on as scheduled. NRA board member Charles Cotton said Thursday that if the pastor had not forbidden guns in the church and campaigned for gun control, the tragedy could have been stopped. That is how crazy this is getting. I am trying to figure out what kind of gun these folks think Jesus would carry?

Guns however are not the problem. The attitude that the proper response to violence is more violence is the problem. Churches that spew hate are the problem. A face of Christianity that calls for murder of gays, lesbians whomever the other is, and they are out there, is the problem. Remember the KKK, one of the most violent racists groups claims to be a Christian organization.

Ultimately this is about racism that underlies this violence and all the violence we have seen this past year. That racism was the motivation for the multiple murders can not be doubted with the discovery of the white supremacist web site that has Dylan's picture and words on it. In a statement from the Diocese of Georgia the bishops there wrote the following:

The perpetrator was not born to hate. God did not create him so. Somewhere along the way in his life he was taught to hate, and not just to hate, but to hate black people.

Until we as a society address such hatred and its sources such tragedies will continue. Because of that we renew our commitment to seeking truth and reconciliation among people of all races, creeds and cultures.

At its base racism, in all its forms, is sin. It is founded on a lie and is therefore an affront to God, an abuse of power and a demonic spirit. Racism is depravity and deviance from Jesus' example and teaching about the sanctity of human dignity and the oneness of the human family.

Racism injures both the victim and the perpetrator. The victim of racism is constantly and culturally force-fed a diet of inferiority, indignity and shame simply for being born as God designed¹.

God cares. Jesus the prince of peace cares, but we are the answer. We are the hands and feet of Christ on this earth now. The answer is found in the teachings of Christ. Love one another as I have loved you. Love your neighbor as yourself. More importantly in the parable of the sheep and goats when Jesus teaches "what you have done for the least of these you have done for me." When all of God's creatures are treated as equal, as worthy, when we respect the dignity of every human being, then and only then can this cycle of violence and hate be stemmed.

How is the question. We start with last week's parable of the mustard seed. We start small by stopping subtle and little signs and acts of racism that we can control. We start by seeing people and not a color or group or anything that says other. We start when a person makes a racist comment or joke by speaking up and calling them on it. Then we let that seed take root and grow.

¹ <http://gaepiscopal.org/?p=6260>

Our diocese made a start with their Repairing the Breach commission. Many responded with the attitude that they didn't need to watch this. People said, "Mark, we're past that." Well maybe not. Maybe we need to hear the truth that racism is still alive and well. I've had my eyes opened by taking the racism training at seminary in a room with African Americans and heard how my classmates grew up with the subtle and not so subtle discrimination that still exists. I've had my eyes opened when the new Methodist pastor at a church on Cape Cod told me about being followed in the grocery store because they assumed he was going to shop lift because he was black. I've had my eyes opened recently by listening to the struggles of the people in the Lake Edwards area where Wendy's church is located. I've had my eyes opened by members of our parish and neighbors of mine who feel they have to have what is known as "the talk" with their black sons about how to respond when stopped by a police officer. If you don't believe me sit down and have lunch with a friend who is African American and if they are honest they will tell you the truth, that racism still exists and is a daily part of their life.

Friday's at noon on WHRV is a panel discussion featuring leaders of our black community. When asked what can we do one pastor said, "Put on the armor of God and pray to the Prince of Peace like you have never prayed before."

So let us end in prayer this morning. This is a prayer written by the Kentucky Council of Churches:

"Holy One, we gather in this space and time to join in prayer for our brothers and sisters of Emanuel AME Church. We are disheartened at the tragedy of lives lost, and one of your faithful communities distressed and wounded. We cry out for comfort and healing for the grieving, and justice and mercy for the perpetrator.

Forgive us for any part that we have in the cruelty and violence of this world. Shake us from our complacency, and set us on the path of righteousness that leads us to the justice and healing places where we need to be present. Help us to be instruments of your compassion and peace. Give us the courage to speak out against violence, hatred, and prejudice.

By your power, heal all wounds, repair all chasms, bring your kingdom to fruition that all may live in joy, peace, and love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.