

Learning to Trust©**Matthew 6:25-34, Psalm 27:1-6****Dr. Sharlyn Gates****June 21, 2015**

Thursday morning, this past week, I got my coffee and went in to the living room to watch some news with Fred, as we always do.

That morning was one of those times when we watched with a sick feeling of horror, as we saw pictures from Charleston, S.C. and heard the story of a gunman going into a church, sitting with the parishioners and pastor there for an hour as they studied the Bible and prayed, and then opening fire on them, killing nine innocent victims, and the pastor, in the place where we go to for sanction, for reprieve from the outside world of chaos and crime – the Church.

This was, even through the admission of the one who committed the murders, a hate crime. It was because of hatred for black human beings that this young man decided he needed to kill. What a coward, to go into a church where all people are welcomed, where all are vulnerable.

But, what stood out to me as we watched the news again that evening, and the days that followed, was that, in spite of a horrific act that came out of a deep place of hatred, people of faith – Christians, Jews, Muslims – were joining their voices together in prayer and trust in God – believing that God would get them through this sad and unbelievably difficult time.

They have that trust because God has brought them through, countless times before, when that same church – the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston – had stood for justice, had even been burned to the ground and built again, had been demolished in an earthquake, and again was rebuilt.

This church is known as Mother Emmanuel in Charleston because of the lead role the church – its people and pastors – have taken throughout the years, working to eliminate slavery, and to be involved in the civil rights movement.

There could be no clearer illustration of what the psalmist was writing about, in Psalm 27! This is a psalm of trust. Listen carefully to the tone, the mood, in what David writes, as I read the first 6 verses:

Psalm 27

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

There is no doubt about this being a serious, frightening situation that David is in. He writes that enemies have circled all around, how “evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—“

Last week I shared with you Walter Bruggeman’s description of the Psalms – Psalm of Orientation, where everything is going good; Psalms of Disorientation, where things are falling apart; life is not good; enemies surround and kill; there is much change and much to be in grief about. These are psalms of lament, crying out to God for help.

And there are Psalms of Reorientation, where things are getting better but the memories of the grief and pain are too fresh to let go of.

This psalm is both a Psalm of Disorientation – where we do hear a prayer for help in a terrifying situation – but at the same time it is a Psalm of Reorientation because the psalmist has more trust than he does terror.

A psalm of trust expresses what great danger there is in the crisis, yet there is a deep trust that God can be counted on to help. And the reason for this trust? It is because of past experience with God.

These psalms, these prayers to God, are surely written by people who have been there before. The maturity of faith stands out in psalms of trust.

These are the faithful who have been in these deep, miry pits in life before, and through their past experiences of terror, of their cries to God, they have learned that God is faithful and present.

They have learned that God is our Light and our Salvation, the stronghold of our lives. Because of God, we have no need to fear!

As the responses from the community of faith are being released, what we hear is trust. Yes, there is grief. Yes, there is a cry for justice and for the hatred to stop, which is a cry for all of us – especially to us who follow the commandment to love all, as God loves us ...

But, there is a strong sense of deep trust in God, who has brought them through other times of crises. Those in Charleston, along with all of us whose hearts are hurting for them, who stand in solidarity with them, and all our African American brothers and sisters, stand with one foot in disorientation and one foot in reorientation.

We tremble with grief and agony over the senseless loss of lives because of hatred towards any one who is God's precious creation. We walk with tears for those who are living in that place of loss and pain. And we are witnesses as we hear them say boldly, through tears of deep lament - "I forgive you."

Yet, all the while, we keep our eyes on the One who makes all things new, who works all things together for good, the One who is always present, who is our refuge in a time of trouble, our hiding place, who is our stronghold, our light and our salvation.

We do it because He has brought us through many times before and He promises to always be with us.

But, I think that same God of love and help is also a God of justice and I am quite sure He calls us who follow him, to be people of justice and truth and courage, as well. We are not just called to pray and trust, but we are called to action.

Do we not have an obligation as the Body of Christ, to speak out for justice, to speak out against hatred, to say the racist jokes are not appropriate, to tell the truth of God's love for all in those places where we find ourselves – our white selves – where it is easy to just not speak at all?

Perhaps, besides just praying for those who are being killed and their families, perhaps we should be fervently asking God to put us in places where we might have influence; to show us how we can take action for justice, and to give us the courage to do it.

Finally, I end this sermon with a message and prayer from the office of our Presbyterian General Assembly:

“The chief of police in Charleston has named this a hate crime. We know of no other name for a crime that forces a five-year-old child to play dead in the church in order to live.

Arresting the shooter is the job of law enforcement. Arresting hate is the work we are all called to do as disciples of Jesus Christ. May God never give up on us as we face our own racism and its tragic impact on congregations, their communities, and our very souls.”

Almighty God, our gathering together for worship and prayer is, this day, both an offering of praise and a show of courage. We come to this sanctuary mindful that even sacred spaces are not necessarily safe spaces. We bow our heads remembering our brothers and sisters in Christ whose last earthly act was prayer. We give thanks for the lives of your faithful servants: Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Susie Jackson, Daniel Simmons and Depayne Middleton Doctor. Comfort their families and friends and strengthen them in the difficult days that are ahead. We pray, too, because Christ commands us to, for Dylan Roof and his family. Bring peace, transform hearts, show us again your resurrection power in places we cannot imagine it can come.

You tell us, Lord God, that perfect love casts out fear and the families of the victims of Mother Church and the people of Charleston have shown us what loving fearlessness looks like. Forgiveness has been extended, hands have been held, hymns have been sung, prayers have been lifted, unity has been demonstrated. The Goliath of hate and racism has not and will not win.

People of faith and prayer, slain after extending Christ's welcome in God's house, have left a legacy that cannot be gunned down. Their lives of love and grace have begat love and grace. The gifts of the Spirit that you gave them – gifts of love, joy, peace,

gentleness and goodness – appeared defeated on Wednesday night, but on Thursday when people came together and sang, “We Shall Overcome,” and on Friday when words of forgiveness were spoken and a vigil packed a coliseum, and on Saturday when crowds gathered in solidarity to say that symbols have consequences, and today as we and countless others pray for peace and commit to being peacemakers, we recognize the gifts you gave those nine are unstoppable, exponential, inevitable and victorious.

God of justice and compassion, you sent your Son for the sake of the world you love. He was murdered; his last words a prayer for forgiveness. Three days later he rose from the dead, his first words ones of reassurance, telling us not to be afraid because even death had been defeated.

Today we remember and proclaim: Violence and hate do not have the last word. The love of God made known to us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, always has the last word. The Spirit’s crop of goodness and love and joy and peace and gentleness will not stop growing. Now is the time for us – people of faith, brothers and sisters of every race and background – to recognize these unshakable truths and in the midst of the storm, trust the power of the One in the boat with us.

We yield ourselves to you, Triune God, knowing you bring redemption, reconciliation and resurrection. Make us your witnesses. May your perfect love in us and shown through us, cast out fear and help transform the world.

Amen.

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Closing Prayer from General Assembly of the PC (USA)

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, God who has brought us thus far on our way, only you know why someone would enter into your house of worship and open fire on your children. Only you know why hate would run so deep that it would cause one of your creations to kill others you have formed. In our confusion over this senseless act, we appeal to you for understanding and courage to continue to fight for justice. We pray right now for the families of those who lost lives at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. on June 17, and ask that you would wrap your loving arms around them and the entire community. Likewise, we pray for an end to the continued racial unrest and violence that permeates the United States and the world, and ask you to guide us to work earnestly for change.

Now unto you who is able to keep us from falling, we pray all these things.

Amen