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“Soul Catching Up”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
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Psalm 66; 2 Cor. 8:7–15; Mark 5: 21–43

I don't react quickly to things. I admire people who can do that.

But I tend to go numb first when tragic things happen,

like an opossum that plays dead until the danger has passed,
and then it can get up and continue its journey.

This is how I felt after last week's massacre

at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC.

I felt numb all over after it happened, the same way I did after 9/11.

I couldn't seem to find the words to talk about it, the theological concepts
to explain it, or the appropriate emotions to express.

That's one reason I was so grateful when Sam Miglarese stepped forward
and agreed to compose a letter on behalf of our congregation

to the membership of Mother Emanuel, expressing how
we normally would feel after such a disaster, if we could feel.

I couldn't do it last Friday, although I was coming around to it by that Sunday.

I confessed to Cherrie Henry, my clergy colleague, my dilemma,

and she said, "Yea, me, too. I don't always trust my initial feelings about
these tragic events. I have to wait for my soul to catch up!"

So, that's what I've been doing for the last 11 days: allowing my soul to
catch up with the maelstrom of murder in Charleston and the loss

of our local hero, Ed Kwon, and two other significant deaths,
all within a matter of days.

I could make a good argument that pastors suffer from PTSD, too!

So we all need to take good care of ourselves
emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Therefore, in light of our scripture readings for today,

I want to offer the following reflections

with which you can either agree or disagree

or take time to form your own opossum opinions for yourselves.

1. Small is okay. Remember a few weeks ago when we read the Jesus parables
from Mark that dealt with small things, small seeds that produce great yield?

Remember Rory Dillon cried because he dropped his two tiny mustard seeds
that Sarah Finbow gave him to hold?

“To what shall compare the Kingdom of God?” Jesus asks.

How about a tiny mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, that grows and becomes
the largest of all garden plants?” (cf. Mark 4:30–32)

In the terrible incident that happened at Mother Emanuel AME,

my husband and I were astonished by the simple fact that the AME Pastor,
Clementa Pinckney, a SC State Senator, would drive back from

Columbia on a Wednesday evening to attend a bible study for nine or ten people.

We noted how many times we have complained ourselves, as pastors,

when we have offered a bible study or a class, spent time in preparation,
and have had only nine or ten people show up.

But here was this extraordinarily gifted pastor and public servant, husband and father,
with much to keep him busy in the South Carolina State Legislature,

driving home to be part of a bible study

for a tiny mustard seed of a gathering.

And this was the very text they were discussing: the kingdom of God parables

from Mark which focus upon very small, miniscule things
with the potential for exponential growth.

The message of the parable could not be clearer to me than now:

don't sweat the small stuff, the small numbers, just keep at it!

Keep grounding people in Scripture, keep bridging life to text, week after week,

even if you only have nine or ten at a time, or less than 200 show up in worship!

Size does not matter. Growth is up to God. You give them something to eat,

whether five show up, or 15, or 5,000.

2. Excel in the grace of giving. I have been so impressed this week

by our congregation's generosity of Spirit and grace of giving.

Just as the Apostle Paul holds up the generosity of the Macedonian church

as an example, I also want to brag a little on the generosity of this congregation.

At last week's Vacation Church School at Camp New Hope,

we had 100 children, 40 youth, and about 40 volunteer adults

involved in camp directly.

Ten of those children were from FPC, ten of those youth were ours,

and another 15 of those adults were ours.

But those were only the direct daily participants.

Then there were the drivers from FPC who drove children from Iglesia

Emanuel to and from camp, and there were the donors who

gave financial aid so that children without means could attend.

You might think that Vacation Church School is fluff in the face of the

momentous events of last week that occurred in Charleston.

But I would disagree with you on that.

Vacation Church School is multi-church, multi-cultural, multi-racial training

for our children. It's preventive care against the kind of objectification,

hatred and violence that took hold of the Charleston shooter, Dylann Roof.

At VCS, we have children from different cultures, different races, speaking different

languages, face-to-face in groups, studying God's word, and practicing

God's love for each other in God's beautiful outdoor world.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." Sounds like something Jesus once said in a parable, doesn't it?

Last week's Durham CAN caucus held at St. Phillip's Episcopal Church was attended by 300 people—16 of them from FPC. They were advocating for affordable housing, public education, racial equity in police protection, and other issues for the common good of our neighbors. It was a standing room only crowd on one of the hottest days this summer, but FPC was well-represented at the meeting, where our Sharon Hirsch spoke. Delia Kwon said that Edward Kwon wanted to be at the caucus so badly that he asked her to get him up out of his bed and take him to the meeting. Unfortunately, she had to tell him "no."

On Saturday, we put out a call for people to rally behind a handicapped couple, perfect strangers to us, who needed help moving from one apartment to another. Eight saints showed up to pack and box a household that had accumulated and collected "stuff" for eight years, and move them half a mile away to more affordable housing in Chapel Hill. The woman, tethered to oxygen 24/7, cried when she thanked and hugged me that afternoon for sending people whom she never even knew to help them. And did I mention that the temperature approached 100 on that day, too?

And then last Sunday, when Delia Kwon called at 9:15 am to say that Edward had died, I told her that I couldn't leave just yet to help her, but I would try to send someone else.

So, when Homer Ashby and Ed Pritchett walked in for Sunday School, I explained the dilemma, and they did an immediate about face

to go to the Kwons' house to be with Delia.

And they are only two of the 36 members who have volunteered who exhibited the "eager willingness" Paul talks about, to sit with Edward during his final days so Delia could continue to work, and Talitha could finish out her school year.

This week's Summer Service Camp in the city for 16 youth is the brainchild of Christyn Klinck and Brent Curtis—another labor of love in the heat.

And I haven't even mentioned the people who have brought in blessing bags for the hungry and thirsty this week who constantly ring our doorbell here.

Paul says, "See that you excel in the grace of giving." (2 Cor. 8:7)

I seem to see excellent generosity and grace of giving everywhere I look!

3. Excel also in the grace of forgiving.

Back to the events in Charleston...

When the shooter was captured and arraigned in court that Friday, and the families of the victims had an opportunity to speak about their loss, were you not just blown away by how many of them offered forgiveness to him?

"I forgive you," the daughter of victim Ethel Lance said.

"You took something very precious from me and I will never talk to her ever again.

I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

Bethane Middleton Brown, the sister of victim Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, said,

"I acknowledge I am very angry. But one thing that she's... taught me is that we are the families that love built.

We have no room for hate, so we have to forgive."

"I forgive you," said Anthony Thompson, the husband of slain Myra Thompson.

"But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent.

Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters most: Christ.

So that he can change it, can change your ways no matter what happened to you, and you'll be okay.

Do that and you'll be better off than what you are right now."

We talk about forgiveness a great deal in church.

We pray about it every time we worship reciting the Lord's Prayer. But to see it in practice is truly a miracle and truly a game changer. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his *Book of Forgiveness*, speaks about the radical concept of unconditional forgiveness: a different model of forgiveness than the gift with strings. "In this model, forgiveness frees the person who inflicted the harm from the weight of the victim's whim—what the victim may demand in order to grant forgiveness—and the victim's threat of vengeance. But it also frees the one who forgives. The one who offers forgiveness as a grace is immediately untethered from the yoke that bound him or her to the person who caused the harm. When you forgive," Tutu says, "you are free to move on in life, to grow, to no longer be a victim. When you forgive, you slip the yoke, and your future is unshackled from your past." (Desmond Tutu. *The Book of Forgiveness*, p. 21)

I remember reading the book *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon before I went to seminary in 1992, and being astonished that Christians are called to live countercultural lives.

In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas and Willimon note that "every time we come to the Lord's Table, we are given important training in how to forgive and how to receive forgiveness.

Here is a community in which even small (mustard seed like) ordinary occurrences every Sunday, like eating together in Eucharist become opportunities to have our eyes opened to what to what God is up to in the world and to be part of what God is doing. If we get good enough at forgiving the strangers who gather around the Lord's Table,

we hope that we shall be good at forgiving the strangers who
gather with us around the breakfast table.”

They say, “Our everyday experience of life in the congregation
is training in the arts of forgiveness: it is everyday, practical confirmation
of the truthfulness of the Christian vision.”

(Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 91)

I never imagined then that forgiveness might be *the most* countercultural
action that we not only profess, but practice.

Who does this? Who forgives the person or people who hurt you the most?
Jesus did, from the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
Jesus, the Son of God, set the pattern for forgiveness and reconciliation.

He offered his betrayer—the one who sat in bible study with him,
the one who sold him out to death—forgiveness.

And we are called to practice forgiveness because God has forgiven us.

But it’s truly extraordinary to see it happen *so quickly* in the aftermath
of the shooting, not in my way, not in my opossum style, but quickly,
instinctively, by people highly formed and highly disciplined in their faith.

Political pundit Harold Ford, Jr., on talk show *Morning Joe* said he thought
the Nobel Peace Prize Committee should look long and hard at the city
of Charleston, SC, for the peaceful way they have come together
to offer forgiveness and to stand in unity, not in chaos, after this crisis.

I tend to agree with him. I tend to be paralyzed by amazement this time.

4. Moving forward from this point.

Tragedy does tend to bring us together, initially.

After 9/11, or Hurricane Katrina, or Super Storm Sandy, or a tornado,
we forget our incidental differences and act for each other

in ways we don’t normally tend to act on a day to day basis.

Our skin color, gender, sexual orientation, and politics fall to the wayside.

Our reflex to care kicks in and becomes unstoppable.

We can even take down the Confederate Flag. So intense is our empathy
for those who have suffered such defamation and loss.
But can we sustain our empathy, our reflex to care, our desire to heal
and be healed? Will all the power to heal go out from us,
or can we touch the Jesus garment for further on-going transformation?

Our churches still are bastions of segregation. Should they be?
Is Charleston our clarion call to integrate our congregations significantly?
Would this crisis have been averted if Mother Emanuel AME had been
a predominantly black church instead of an historically black church?

Would the upbringing of Dylann Roof have been different
if he had been raised in a racially mixed congregation?

In that our greatest strength can be our greatest weakness,
we have to start reconsidering The Reformed Tradition,
which is an oxymoron of a name in itself,
and decide if we can be more reformed and less traditional.

Can the tradition of our faith still be grounded in Sola Scriptura, be less rooted
in Scotch-Irish 16th century Northern European white culture,
which seems to place us in a silo of segregation?

Can the reformed part of our faith call us to build bridges from Sola Scripture
to people of all races, ethnicities, economies, ages, and states of health
so that we might be one, in Christ, which is our kingdom goal?

As my opossum continues to wake up, perhaps you will help me discern together
how we might sustain the healing of our nation in the aftermath of Charleston.

For the time being, I pray that we will continue to grow, seed by seed, in the rich grace
of giving and forgiving that has its source
in the healing and life-giving generosity of Jesus. Amen.