

“Do you not *care* that we are perishing?”

Mark 4:35-41

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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I was doing pretty well, even getting an early start on my sermon this week. Even with VBS and interviews for a new Director of Worship and Music, even with Finance committee and leading a new book study, by the middle of the week, I was already way ahead of myself—maybe two-thirds done with a pretty good sermon, if I do say so myself. It was a going to be missional sermon—a challenging sermon. It was based on our gospel reading today—an encouragement to hear Jesus’ invitation “Let us go across to the other side,” an invitation spoken both to his disciples then and to us now. I was going to remind us all that Jesus issues us this invitation to venture out into the unknown, and that it seems pretty risky to most of us. Because, let’s face it, it’s easier to stay on this side of the lake, in our comfort zones, to stick with what is known. Or as more than one person responding to our Worship and Music survey put it: Change is hard. And it is part of our human nature to ignore our rather obvious need for change than actually make change happen.

It would have been a great sermon. And I promise, I’ll resurrect it—or great portions of it—at a later date. But it is not the sermon I have for you this morning.

See, I woke up on Thursday, with most of the rest of the world, to the horrifying and truly debilitating news that nine people had been shot and killed at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Shocking. Alarming. Terrifying. And it kept getting worse: Nine people—ranging in age from 26 to 87—were shot to death while attending a Bible study and prayer group. Among them were four pastors. Two of the pastors were graduates of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, one of our ELCA seminaries, and perhaps the most racially and denominationally diverse among them. These folks had opened their doors to a stranger—welcomed him, in fact, with open arms as he engaged with them in discussions of the scriptures for nearly an hour. And then, as he had allegedly planned to do all along, motivated by a belief in white supremacy, armed with a gun he apparently received as a birthday present, and declaring to the pastor, the state senator, the librarian, the coach, the recent college graduate, the grandmothers, that they had taken over his country and he was taking it back.

Since first hearing that news, I’ve floated between feeling incredibly sad, extremely angry, exceptionally frustrated, embarrassed, haunted and distracted... and not least of all, guilty. If not guilty of the crime itself, at least guilty by association for living in, participating in, benefiting from and for the most part going along with and doing relatively little to change a society that is still steeped both in systemic racism and gratuitous violence. Jon Stewart, in one of the best monologues to date on his nearly two decades-long run on the Daily Show said he didn’t have any response but sadness as he peered once again “into the abyss of the depraved violence that we do to each other and the nexus of a gaping racial wound that will not heal, yet we pretend doesn’t exist.”

Sisters and brothers, we have to talk about it.

We have to talk about this terrorist attack, this violence afflicted on a church which has long been a symbol for the black community. We have to talk about the fact that we are steeped in that culture in this country—here in the North as well as in the South it must be said—a society that is built on systemic racism, white privilege and white power. We can't settle it—at least not today. But we have to name it. We have to say it out loud. We have to confront it, and put up with whatever discomfort this may bring us here in our house of worship this morning if for no other reason than to honor the memory of those who were senselessly murdered in their house of worship just a few short days ago.

I don't know what text they were studying at Emmanuel, but I wonder if they read this line: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" That was the question the disciples asked Jesus as they confronted the storm on the sea of Galilee, as he slept like a dead man in the stern of the boat. Don't you care that we are dying?"

We could address this the same question to ourselves here at Christ the King, we could hear this question addressed to us as a mostly white, mostly middle-class and in most ways comfortable congregation, couldn't we? We could hear this same question addressed by our African American sisters and brothers, addressed to nearly all of our ELCA congregations, as we continue to be a denomination that is 97% white. We could—and perhaps we should ask ourselves, "Do *we* not care that people are perishing?" Do we not care that children are dying, from poverty, preventable disease, and violence? Do we not care that men and woman of color are imprisoned at disproportionate throughout our country? Do we not care that good church folk—people at a Wednesday night Bible study, faithful people who opened their doors and welcomed a stranger, Godly people who were literally gathered in prayer—do we not care that they were massacred, killed in cold blood by someone who, it seems, is in so many ways one of our own? God cares. And as people of God, we must care. As people of God we must declare that Black Lives Matter.

Sure, all lives matter to God—but at this moment we need to intentionally reaffirm and declare that Black Lives Matter. To God. To us. To our faith. To our church. As Pastor Emily Scott wrote, "people of color live life in the midst of a storm that they cannot simply step away from our out of. As white people," she continues, "we have the privilege of seeing the storm from the outside, stepping away when we choose.

"But Jesus is in the midst of the storm. He's right there with all those people who have been weathering this particular storm for such a long time. And our job, plain and simple, is to follow Jesus." Go and do likewise, imitate, emulate, replicate. Ask what would Jesus do? And do like Jesus does. Follow. We're called to follow.

Jesus invites his followers to go to the other side. And Jesus takes them there, takes them to the other side. It is no easy passage, then or now. Nor should we expect that it would be. "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod felt in the days when

hope unborn had died. Yet, with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our parents sighed?”

Getting to the other side means a pretty bumpy ride—that almost always happens when Jesus tries to move us from one place to another. Perhaps the hardest part is that first step—getting into the boat. Naming the thing for what it is. Waking up to the reality of system-wide racism, to the sin of white privilege. Bishop Eaton, in her pastoral letter to the ELCA calls us all to realize, to admit, and to confess, that “racism is a *fact* in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact [as we see in Charleston] are deadly.” We are called to change, and change is hard. But Jesus doesn’t say “*You* go over to the other side,” but “Let *us* go over to the other side.”

Realize. Admit. Confess. Repent. Change our ways. Cross over to the other side. Endure the storms. Follow Jesus.

I want to close out this time simply by offering my own words of repentance. In this, I am inspired by Pastor Mike Carlson of St Andrew’s in Mahtomedi—along with others who have challenged me to confront in myself so many of the things for which I feel guilty, of which I feel responsible. I offer these as my own words, my own prayer, my own confession. And I invite you, as your pastor, to consider if God may be calling you to a similar repentance.

For the times I have participated in and knowingly benefited from white privilege.
I repent and ask forgiveness.

For the times I have not spoken up against racism of any kind.
I repent and ask forgiveness.

For not consciously working to put an end to racism in my own corner of the world.
I repent and ask forgiveness.

For believing—even for a second, even as a reflex, even as an impulse—the myth, the lie, the *SIN* of white supremacy. **I repent and ask forgiveness.**

May I live intentionally, seeking reconciliation in my life, in my work and in my relationships with all people. May your Holy Spirit come and renew me.

Speak to my heart, oh God. Speak to our world, Lord Jesus. Say it again and again: Peace. Be Still. Thanks be to God. Amen.