

June 21, 2015  
Lectionary 12, Year B  
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Emmanuel, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### **Now is the Acceptable Time**

They are our sisters and brothers in Christ. Clementa and Tywanza and Cynthia and Sharonda and Myra and Ethel and Daniel and De-Payne and Suzie, our brothers and sisters at Emanuel.

Not Emmanuel Lutheran. Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. A church that was born out of the history of slavery.

A church that worked for the liberation of the slaves and provided comfort and literally sanctuary to thousands of former slaves and their descendants as they worked within a system that was stacked against them because of the color of their skin. A church that survived and thrived in a culture that fought violently for it to fail.

Its meetings were outlawed for 30 years. Its building was burned down, its pastors and its members were arrested during the civil rights movement as they peacefully assembled, and on Wednesday night, June 17, 2015, 9 of its members were shot and killed when a white man entered their bible study, was welcomed by them, and ultimately opened fire on them, after sitting with them for an hour.

They are our sisters and brothers in Christ. We joined to them in the waters of baptism. We have been made one with them by the Holy Spirit. We are part of the same body together, the body of Christ.

But we share more in common with them than all of that. Your pastor and two of their pastors attended the same seminary. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. The Rev. Clementa Pickney, senior pastor at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church was a graduate of LTSS, as was another one of the pastors at Emanuel, the Rev. Daniel Simmons. I didn't personally know either of these two other graduates of my alma mater, but this horror, which touches our whole nation, touches our Lutheran community very closely.

Because not only were the victims, connected with the Lutheran Church, but so was the perpetrator. He was a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in West Columbia, South Carolina, which is not far from where two of the victims of this attack went to seminary. His pastor, Pastor Tony Metze, was a candidate for bishop in the South Carolina Synod.

When something like this happens, we often want to identify with the victims, to claim them, to honor them, to recognize them as a part of us. But in this horror, we find ourselves far more closely related than we would like to the perpetrator, who at some point in his life, sat in a Lutheran church, probably sang hymns from a LBW and an ELW, and received communion at a Lutheran altar.

It would be so much easier if we could point to some fringe group, some fundamentalist sect, some cult that he was a part of, it would be so much easier to vilify his family if they weren't so much like our families.

Now, I do not know the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church personally, but I knew Lutheranism in Columbia, South Carolina well, and I can almost guarantee that he was not in any way, shape, or form endorsing or promoting racism from his pulpit or in any of his teachings. But there were other voices that were speaking far more loudly in this young man's ear.

Of course, there are plenty of people who want to assign mental illness to this person, as though this explains his act in its entirety and perhaps to a point it does. But, if he is mentally ill, then his mental illness took an all too familiar shape and expression in racial hatred. It was all too easy for him to find a way of blaming others for the pain he felt, all too easy to fit himself into a narrative of racial resentment and fear and that is far too prevalent in a society that simply cannot define itself as post racism or colorblind.

That narrative as much as anything else, led him to travel across a state and murder people in a church that for many is a symbol of liberation, and of faithfulness to the gospel that makes all people free, in spite of all of the

opposition that they faced over its almost 200 year history from laws that tried to stifle it and terrorists who tried to shut it down.

For its members their church, which, we can only imagine, was to them what our church is to us, a home, a family, and sanctuary; holy ground; has become a crime scene, a nightmare, but it is still holy ground, consecrated by the blood of their new martyrs, and the whole church's new martyrs: Clementa and Tywanza and Cynthia and Sharonda and Myra and Ethel and Daniel and De-Payne and Suzie, who died while they were at prayer and studying the bible, after they had welcomed a stranger into their midst in Jesus' name, and whose families through ripped apart lives and torn open hearts and mind-numbing grief are still able to speak words of forgiveness to the one who had shattered them.

I had my whole sermon for today planned around the gospel reading the story of Jesus stilling the storm, but after Wednesday, I had to throw that one out and instead, I looked to the second reading for today, when Paul says, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"

Because it's simply too easy for us to grieve with the families of our fallen sisters and brothers in Christ. It's simply too easy to blame and hate and speculate about the perpetrator as though it is an individual who committed an individual atrocity, rather than the product of a racist culture that is still going strong in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. It's simply too easy to lament about horrible state of the world we live in and wonder where it's all headed and how it's all going to end. And it's simply too easy to turn off the news, to go on a media break, and say that I'm just not going to know about that, it's too much for me, and it's so far away. It's so easy to just turn our attention back to our own problems and to let God sort out the rest of the world in God's own time, and to wait until we get to heaven for the peace that we say belongs to Christ and to his people. Not my problem.

But Paul said, “Now. Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.” Which means that we just can’t wait. We can’t wait. Because we are God’s people.

Paul described his experience of being a Christian as one of violence and opposition. This is what he experienced as a Christian in the early first century:

We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger...We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Have you ever wondered why the Greco-Roman world reacted with such violence to a tiny group of people who met together in each other’s homes and shared a meal together and helped the poor and buried the dead and talked about a new kingdom?

Early Christians were peaceful, they were for the most part poor, they could never be perceived as a practical threat to the Roman Empire. After Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the gatherings of Christians were for the most part small. There were a couple of times, like Pentecost, when the disciples drew a crowd, but for the most part they did face to face evangelism, in households and synagogues.

So, what was the problem? Where was the threat?

Well, there was the Christians’ peculiar insistence on monotheism, which made them unable to participate in the cult of the emperor, they couldn’t worship

the emperor as a God, which, in that world, would have been seen as very unpatriotic and a threat to the stability of the society.

But there was another way in which Christians were considered to be a threat to the stability of the society. It was the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ broke down the walls between people. The carefully constructed social and economic stratification that so many people believed was essential to keeping order in the sprawling Empire.

The Roman Empire was a society a lot like the one we live in, multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, diversely religious, and economically unbalanced, with a huge population of poor people and a much smaller wealthy and ruling class.

And Christianity, which grew up in that society, broke down walls. In the small Christian communities, there were slaves and free worshiping together, people of different racial make-ups worshiping together, people who came from different religious backgrounds worshiping together. The gospel of Jesus Christ broke down the walls that made it easy to classify people into categories of us/them, and that made it a threat.

So Paul and the others who carried the gospel into towns and villages and cities were perceived as threats and were dealt with accordingly, by government and concerned citizens, and they experienced riots, beatings, afflictions, imprisonments, and hardships of every kind.

Emanuel AME knows that kind of past, having experienced as a church community, vandalism, imprisonments, beatings, riots, poverty, and now, on its very grounds, murder. Because they knew that “Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.” Now is the time when the gospel of Jesus Christ is alive in the world tearing down the walls that divide people, rooting out hatred and racism, bringing people together and speaking a word a justice and a word of peace in a world that rejects both justice and peace.

And now it's our turn. And the turn of other churches, like us to claim the new vision of the world that comes from Jesus, a vision of the world that is not divided by race or culture or language or even religion, and a vision of the church that does not judge the world, but that blesses the world.

The problem is, I don't know how. I don't know how to root out hatred. I don't know how to publically witness. I don't know how to make people know that the gospel of peace, the gospel of love, the gospel of mercy is anything more than just more words in a sea of words some of which advocate for justice, peace, mercy and some of which promote hatred and violence and fear and division.

But I am a Christian, and when I don't know what to do, I know what to do. I need to pray, we need to pray that God will give us courage, and wisdom, and energy, to claim and share the salvation, the healing that God says is already ours. So, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to pray.

This Wednesday, and every Wednesday that I am here this summer, I'm going to be here, praying for the salvation of the whole world, praying for our sisters and brothers at Emanuel AME, praying for our sisters and brothers at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in West Columbia, praying for ourselves and for the ways in which we participate in systems that oppress, consciously and unconsciously; praying for this broken world we live in, and praying that when we have a chance to speak out against the hatred that infects so much of our culture, we will have the courage and the wisdom to do it.

And I invite you to join me whenever you can, if you can be here or not, at 7:30 on Wednesday, I invite you to pray. I invite you to join me in telling Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina, that we are with them, that we are praying for them, one Emmanuel to another, that we have joined them in prayer, believing that God can heal the world and believing that now is the acceptable time. That now is the time of salvation. Now is the time and we are in it, for the healing of the world. Amen.