

This week our lives were disrupted with the news of one American committing an act of terrorism against other Americans on our soil in God's house. A white person killed nine black people because they were black and because the shooter wanted to start a race war, while the Confederate flag waved on the grounds of the South Carolina statehouse in Columbia, which was still at full mast Thursday regardless of requests to lower it. Could racism be any more blatant?

On Tuesday and Wednesday I had looked at the texts for today and decided on Job. I re-read the Book of Job because you can't really just preach on a few verses, and read from some commentaries. I had planned to write a draft of my sermon Thursday night after work. Also I reflected on how the last two times I preached at St. John's I talked about race, so I wasn't going to this time, but then I woke up to news about the shooting. I don't know if any of us will forget where we were when we heard or read the news, or when what happened sunk in.

By the end of the day on Thursday, when I was going to start thinking more about my sermon, I was instead looking for a vigil. I didn't see any in Madison but one in Milwaukee at an ELCA congregation, All People's Church. Through my work with the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin I had wanted to attend that church; one of our advisory council members is a member there. It is an ELCA congregation that is mainly African American, and like St. John's, it has an active outreach to the community. Not wanting to follow my original train of thought about Job and feeling restless from the day, I rather spontaneously decided to drive to Milwaukee for the vigil.

I wish you all could have been there so I'm going to share part of the service with you. The pews were filled with a diverse group of people. The woman sitting next to me was Jewish.

Except for Pastor Steve Jerbi of All Peoples, the speakers were black, which I appreciated because it felt like a time to listen as a white person.

The first speaker talked about the outrage that we need to feel. He focused on the disruption of the shootings that ended nine lives and left some children without fathers on Father's Day and other family members and friends without their loved ones. The shootings disrupted the life of the congregation, the city and our whole country. And then he said, "I hope it disrupts your Sunday." And I thought well I'm sitting here in a pew in Milwaukee instead of on my couch waxing poetically about Job; so far I relate to disruption.

Another speaker, Nate Hamilton, the brother of the mentally ill Donte Hamilton shot by police, got up and talked about love. He said people ask me, "Who are you?" He can say what his work is, that he's Donte's brother, he's the head of a justice coalition. But he is who he is by how he loves. He committed to finding people different than he was that week and feeling love for them. His call to action to us was to love.

Another speaker was Rev. Erma Winbush with St. Mark AME Church, of the same African Methodist Episcopal denomination as the church in Charleston. Pastor Winbush talked about unity. She said we are all part of the same universal church, like what we say in the creed – one holy catholic and apostolic church (catholic - universal), and so she said we all belong to the African Methodist Episcopal church. And that felt like grace. I wasn't feeling great about being white that evening, but she looked around at all the people of different shades of skin and said we are all in this together, and she exuded love.

But to take the connectedness a step further for us there are ELCA connections wrapped up in this tragedy; I want to read the statement that our bishop wrote:

Statement from Bishop Elizabeth Eaton: *Long Season of Disquiet*

“It has been a long season of disquiet in our country. From Ferguson to Baltimore, simmering racial tensions have boiled over into violence. But this ... the fatal shooting of nine African Americans in a church is a stark, raw manifestation of the sin that is racism. The church was desecrated. The people of that congregation were desecrated. The aspiration voiced in the Pledge of Allegiance that we are “one nation under God” was desecrated.

Mother Emanuel AME’s pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, was a graduate of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, as was the Rev. Daniel Simmons, associate pastor at Mother Emanuel. The suspected shooter is a member of an ELCA congregation. All of a sudden and for all of us, this is an intensely personal tragedy. One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own.

We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man. But we know that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly. The Rev. Mr. Pinckney leaves a wife and children. The other eight victims leave grieving families. The family of the suspected killer and two congregations are broken. When will this end?

The nine dead in Charleston are not the first innocent victims killed by violence. Our only hope rests in the innocent One, who was violently executed on Good Friday. Emmanuel, God with us, carried our grief and sorrow – the grief and sorrow of Mother Emanuel AME church – and he was wounded for our transgressions – the deadly sin of racism.

I urge all of us to spend a day in repentance and mourning. And then we need to get to work. Each of us and all of us need to examine ourselves, our church and our communities. We need to be honest about the reality of racism within us and around us. We need to talk and we need to listen, but we also need to act. No stereotype or racial slur is justified. Speak out against inequity. Look with newly opened eyes at the many subtle and overt ways that we and our communities see people of color as being of less worth. Above all pray – for insight, for forgiveness, for courage.

Kyrie Eleison,”

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

St. John’s is no stranger to paradox.

I have felt interrupted this week with thoughts about what I have or haven’t done in ways that perpetuates racism. I’ve gone from wondering about whether I should have called someone on a couple of racist remarks I heard in the last several months to feeling haunted by my silence. I realized I hadn’t yet truly repented. We feel haunted and stuck without facing our mistakes.

Repentance isn’t about getting stuck. We repent with confidence in being forgiven, and then we

move forward.

And I've also been interrupted wondering about what to do. Apparently I'm not alone from seeing postings on Facebook. One friend wrote about how when the news really sunk in, as she was driving, she kept wondering, What can I do? What can I do? She suddenly burst into tears and thought about the Prayer of St. Francis. She knew she had to start there and from there figure out how to act.

I've suddenly moved from being irritated with the Confederate flag waving in the background – I don't see them often - to signing petitions and wondering how to completely get rid of this symbol of deep hatred and slavery.

I am praying that we are coming to some turning point in race relations, and in dealing with other problems. The same week the pope came out with an encyclical on climate change, and several denominations, including ours are supporting it. We hope that with religious and secular voices that we are coming to a turning point. I pray that in Wisconsin, where we are about to pass one of the most devastating budgets in our history, that the people of our state will come to a turning point.

But back to the Charleston, right now we are in lament. Job lamented. His lament was highly self-conscious. Lament in the Psalms and in the words of the prophets very clearly leads to action. In Job we have someone who experienced tremendous personal loss lost and suffered illnesses with an antagonistic force attacking him; and then he challenged the theological way of thinking of his time. His friends told him that he must have done something wrong. He said No, I haven't and I'm mad at God. Where was God in all that Job experience? But Job continued to live with integrity and when he had every reason to believe God had abandoned him at one point he cried out, "I know that my redeemer lives."

In the end God gave the message that his friends were wrong but that Job also had something to learn about how you can't put life into any neat package and say you know all the workings of God. It was a turning point in how to view theology. But what struck me the most in relationship to what I had been reflecting on was Job's capacity to live with integrity and to have faith.

Some of the family members of those who were murdered have shown such a capacity for love and faith. I experienced that love at All People's Church during a service of lament, and I have felt that love at St. John's.

I think that when we lament and also when we repent we need to remember to have confidence in God's grace, in forgiveness and in our capacity to love and live with integrity.

We remember

Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, 49

Cynthia Hurd, 54

Susie Jackson, 87

Ethel Lance, 70

Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41

Tywanza Sanders, 26

Rev. Daniel Simmons Sr., 74

Rev. Sharonda Singleton, 45

Myra Thompson, 59

We pray for their families and friends. We pray for the historic congregation, Mother Emanuel that led slave rebellions and suffered bigotry. We pray to stand with them. We do stand with them. Lord, have mercy.