

June 18, 2015

TALKING ABOUT EVENTS IN CHARLESTON, SC IN WORSHIP

1. The shooting at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC is a tragedy on many levels. There is the general loss of life – brothers and sister in Christ – to violence. The security and sanctuary of the church community was compromised. **There is also the sobering reality that this was a hate crime – one possibly motivated by racism.** So how do we talk about it in worship on Sunday? And, should we?

2. From the perspective of the All Inclusive Outreach Team (AIOT), we believe that to not have any mention of this tragic event would be a tragedy in its own right. There are those who believe we avoid such topics in church because “it’s not the church’s issue.” We don’t mix church and state. Yet, this is not a political issue. It’s not a social issue. It’s not even at its core simply a racial issue. It is a human issue. *We believe in a God in Jesus Christ who is deeply concerned with humanity and the effects of sin, and the shooting at Emmanuel AME is a church issue.* More than that, we believe that those in your pews will want you to say something about, because it’s on their minds as well. Yet, what do we say?

3. The following are a few suggestions. Of course, we honor and respect that you know your congregations best, and will tend to the reactions and sensitivities of your people. Yet, we encourage you to consider saying something. It is part of prophetic witness; it is a chance to proclaim God’s justice. Even greater, it’s a chance to proclaim God’s good news in Jesus Christ in a powerful and relevant way that speaks into the whole of human life.

a. Preaching (RCL): This week’s readings speak well into this event. In Job, God speaks a harsh word against a human reason, without divine knowledge. The Psalm calls people to praise a God who not only listens to the cries of the suffering, but “brought them out from their distress.” 2 Corinthians speaks to the character of Christian courage that comes from hearing the Gospel. We may endure hardship and ridicule, but this grace of God compels us to continue to live and speak and love boldly – “opening wide your hearts.” Mark’s gospel is the classic text of Jesus calming the stormy seas, and the fears of the disciples, even though they have “little faith.”

These texts help us preach a word of hope and promise that God is not only with us in the tragedy of violence and racism, but that God also speaks against it, and compels us as disciples to do the same. It speaks judgment against notions of racial justice that further causes divide and tensions, but rather calls people to speak and live out of loving justice – God’s loving justice. Such a move may put us at odds with the world, but we live courageously, knowing God will protect us and that God’s steadfast love always endures.

b. Preaching (Narrative Lectionary): This week's Psalm of trust conveys a confidence that comes in trusting God. Such trust calls people to live in confident hope rather than fear. One possibility is to talk about trusting God in the task of proclaiming racial justice in light of violence and tragedy. Another possibility is that God calls us to trust, not give into attitudes of fear of threatened security (a church was attacked, we need to become more mistrustful of people), indifference (that's not "our" problem), and of reactionary action ("though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.").

c. Prayers/Liturgy: The Kyrie can be effectively utilized to speak into this, and all tragedy. For example, in the third petition of the chanted Kyrie: "For the peace of the whole world, for those affected by violence in Charleston, SC, for the well-being of Emmanuel AME & the whole church of God, and for the unity....."

A possible intercessory prayer: "God of justice, we cry out to you for our brothers and sisters in Christ at Emmanuel AME in Charleston, SC. Where the tragedy of sin runs rampant, let your unity in Christ prevail. God of mercy, touch the hearts of all on the giving and receiving end of hate with your grace and love, and reconcile them to you and all of us to each other. Lord in your mercy,....."

"Holy God, in light of tragic violence of hate like that at Emmanuel AME in Charleston, there is so much we don't understand. Yet we feel...we feel a sense of discomfort and pain, a sense that all is not right in our world. We ask for your peace to ease our pain. We ask for your forgiveness for our indifference and apathy to the suffering of others. And we ask for your truth to guide our hearts in responding as agents of your grace to this grave act of injustice. Lord in your mercy,

4. These suggestions only serve as guides; we hope this sparks imagination and ideas of your own. In all things, we give thanks for your faithfulness in proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to your people, and for your ministry to God's people!

In Christ,

The All-Inclusive Outreach Team of the VA Synod