



See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. ~ ISAIAH 43:19

June 19, 2015

The Synod of the Northeast PCUSA Leadership and Mission Teams lift in prayer all those suffering in the aftermath of the murders of our African American brothers and sisters in Charleston, SC.

The Synod of the Northeast Mission and Ministry Commission meets next week. We vow to develop an action plan to continue the work we have begun with others in response to the racism, hatred and sanctioning of violence that gave rise to the act of terror that occurred in Charleston this week. Our mourning must give way to acts that show we are truly one in Christ with those who have died and those who are suffering the aftershocks of terror and trauma. It is our actions rather than our words alone that will bring about God's will of justice and peace. In the meantime, we offer the following prayer.

A Prayer of Reflection and Confession to Honor the Lives of Our Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

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Susie Jackson
Ethel Lance
DePayne Middleton-Doctor
Clementa Pinckney
Tywanza Sanders
Daniel Simmons, Sr
Sharonda Singleton
Myra Thompson

Gathered in God's name, they welcomed a stranger, they remembered the needs of their community, and brought them before God, they sought to be closer to God through the study of God's word. They were mothers and fathers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles, grandparents. They came after supper, after a long day at work, in the late spring heat. They left their families, the dishes that would wait unwashed in the sink. They heeded God's call to gather as disciples of Christ, their Lord, for study and prayer.

They gathered in a place where God's love has stood firmly on the side of those whom society would marginalize, bending the long arc of history toward God's will. They embodied that love as surely as Jesus of Nazareth had done in the marginalized communities in the Galilee and Bethany—the house of the poor. Mother Emmanuel, God with us, embraced them in life and in death.

God, who is present in our suffering, hear us as we pray.

We ask how long, Lord. We ask why.

Your answer returns to us:

As long as you insist that systems and structures within which the color of one's skin can mean the difference between life and death either do not exist or are inherently good with only aberrant flaws, Black and Brown people will continue to suffer and die at greater rates than the rest of the population. It is your failure to see and to act that is harming and killing your brothers and sisters.

We must confess:

It is we, as a society, who have instructed our law enforcement officers to protect and serve based on distinctions of zip code, material wealth, and outward appearance.

It is we who have looked time and again at the evidence of disproportionate unemployment rates, disease rates, incarceration rates, and dead bodies, and tried to explain away, deflect or justify the singular message that we continue to discriminate against people of color and specifically Black people.

It is we who have developed language to describe violence that is itself racially charged—when a Muslim acts violently, it's terror; when a Black person acts violently it's thuggery; when a White person acts violently, it is mental illness. These labels reveal stereotypes that we use to assign a universal motive to one group, ascribe an aura of danger to another; and simultaneously evoke sympathy and uniqueness in the final case. This labeling enables us to view one group as potential terrorists, and another group as predisposed criminals, while demanding that Whiteness can't be used to universalize a threat.

It is we who are so self-involved and self-motivated that even as we read this we are thinking, but what about my problems? What about my struggles? Until we can see that acknowledging the truth that Black people in the United States experience racial prejudice with devastating and deadly consequences, all of us will continue to struggle. Division is the tool of evil. But division masquerading as unity is the tool of death.

When you ask how long, you must confess:

As long as you justify violence against a group of people as somehow normal or to be expected, you open the door for violence anywhere and everywhere.

As long as you distance yourself, rather than examining your role, you are complicit in each act of violence and discrimination.

As long as you bear false witness against brothers and sisters by believing and acting on stereotypes and images that promote prejudice, you participate in outcomes with deadly consequences.

As long as you are more concerned with the potential for hurt feelings than the reality of broken and dead bodies, you delay and thus deny justice.

As long as you use the name of God in vain by praying empty prayers while the visions of the young are extinguished and the dreams of old are ended with gunfire, the nightmare will continue.

As long as you rush to cries for unity and reconciliation that do not provide for deep and systemic change, your cries are like clanging gongs and clashing symbols, signifying nothing.

Surely the God who suffered on the cross knows--

When children cannot play in the park, when young men cannot walk across the street, when eye contact can result in torture and death, when a young woman can find herself in broad daylight in her bathing suit face down with the full weight of a man on her back, when grandmothers, librarians, and pastors cannot gather in their church to pray in safety, it is not one man, but a society that is creating terror.

When your children are being killed all day long, poured out like libations, forgive us, Lord when we do nothing, when we change the subject, when we justify terror, and wear prayer like a blindfold. When we compare the mote in another's eye to the log in our own; when we see Black and Brown bodies contorted, bloodied, and dead, and refuse to address and work to change the systems that terrorize and kill them—Convict us Lord, for surely we are as guilty as the hand that twists the arm or holds the gun. We have not faced our own role until we have found a way to act on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed.

We ask your mercy, Lord, first for those who suffer most. We ask your forgiveness even when we do not deserve it. We rely on your grace to work through us for good.

In Your Many Holy Names, we pray. Amen.