

June 22, 2015

Many of you have reached out to me expressing shared grief about the killings this past week in Charleston, my hometown. Thank you. And, many of you have written to inquire about how I am connected to The Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney.

Here is what I have written in an attempt to answer that question. It will always and only be a partial, imperfect answer.

Pinckney.

It is my middle name. But it's not only **my** name. It is a name worn by many across the years, and it is a name, when I had the option to let it go, I chose to keep.

Pinckney was my grandfather's last name. He was an only child, his mother dying shortly after he was born in the flu epidemic of 1918. He was adopted and raised by his maternal grandparents, but they decided he should keep his father's name, carried down the Roger Pinckney line.

I include "Roger" in my description because there are several Pinckney families with roots in South Carolina. Charles, Charles Cotesworth, Thomas, and Eliza Lucas. Politicians, entrepreneurs, and constitution-signers. Years ago I read that more Pinckneys have run for president and lost than any other family. The Pinckneys aren't one family that came to the United States and spread out, they are families who were distant cousins in England who separately left England in order to settle in South Carolina. As people of money, land, and privilege, they built and maintained their lives on the backs of slaves: men, women, and children whose names were taken away from them and replaced with the names of those who claimed to, as was horrifically legal at the time, own them.

When people I know visit South Carolina come back to ask me, "Are you one of those Pinckneys?," sometimes I try and explain the genealogy, other times I just say, "yes." Slavery is no longer legal, but neither is it in the past. Its effects continue to have a place in 2015, seen in economic and social repercussions as well as present and active (both violent and non-violent) attempts to differentiate our culture by race, with white in the primary position.

Growing up in Charleston, most of the racism I learned was observational. We were members (mine was the sixth generation) of the Second Presbyterian Church, less than two blocks away from Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Second Presbyterian, the community where seeds of faith were planted deep within my heart, was all white.

I attended Porter-Gaud School, where I began the 1st grade with an all white class, and by

the time we graduated, 12 years later, had one non-white class member.

And the organizations....the organizations.... many of them exist in the world today with the same discriminations with which they were founded. Swim clubs, yacht clubs, and other social organizations. Add to the list the organizations and societies that refuse women on their membership rolls and at their gatherings and the list is quite a bit longer.

I lived in a white world in a city that was not white. I didn't question it. And, I am ashamed to admit that there were times in my youth when I actively participated in racist systems and patterns. Most of the racism I learned was observational. But, some of it was active.

When I was in college, there were professors who refused to let me get away with that, and called me out on the bullshit southern stories about the nature of race, slavery, and the civil war that I had been told, and which I had accepted. When challenged to study and think, I saw them for what they were, shallow mistruths told to justify and excuse a wrong. Agnes Scott College wasn't a perfect place, but it was the first community of which I was a part that wanted to look honestly at its own complicity in racism and racist systems that persist. Agnes Scott wanted to be a place (we called it a racism-free zone back in the 90s) that named the evils in our midst. Later, in seminary, I would learn about liberation theology. Black theology. Womanist theology.

I may not be personally responsible for slavery, but I am a recipient of white privilege, an inheritor of a system that is un-equal and un-fair and in which not everyone is born with the same horizon or available bootstraps.

I do not believe that is of God. The Kingdom of God for which I wait and which is already in our midst speaks of a different world- a world of justice where wrongs are righted. A place in which the rich go away empty and the hungry are fed. A balancing of accounts.

When my husband and I decided we wanted to get married, we were living north of the Mason-Dixon line. The name Pinckney might as well have been Jones or Bobwhite. I'm the very last on my little branch of the Pinckney family tree. According to tradition, my maiden name should have become my middle name. Instead, I chose to keep my middle name right where it was, close to me. Not in spite of the sins of the past, but because of them. I kept Pinckney as a personal reminder. As a continual presence in my life, so that each time I write, speak, hear, or read my name, this would come to mind:

Did you hear that? You come from people who believed it was acceptable to own other people, who were participants in a genocide whose affects are still playing out in the ways of life and death, hurt and hatred. They justified it with faith. With weariness. With economics. **They were wrong.** Not only were they wrong then, hundreds of years from now your great-great-children look back on this time and wonder the same thing, 'How could the people of the 21st century have been so wrong?' So... don't think you've got it all figured

out. You are a part of a hateful web **and** you are a part of a web of faith. What web is your life demonstrating today?

I kept the Pinckney name as a personal reminder of the importance of humility in this world as well as out of desire to be honest about my imperfections- imperfections that have had real life implications. I kept the name Pinckney out of my need to lament, confess, and repent. To be boldly honest out of a desire to be a part of the world God desires. I do not believe we will be able to welcome that world until we are more able to be honest about the world in which we are currently living.

And now, I share this name with someone (or, rather, he shares it with me) I did not know before this past week, The Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney. A senator in the state of South Carolina and pastor of the congregation that worships less than two blocks from the church where I grew up. Two blocks and worlds away.

Are we family? While I don't know if there is any DNA connection, there is a historical one in our names, a connection brought by ownership and sustained by violence, violence that has resurfaced this past week in Charleston. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote for the New York Times this week:<sup>1</sup>

for one still so young, Mr. Pinckney was deeply aware of the history he carried within himself, a history of the courageous and the slain, of the triumphant and the terrorized. He was fluent in the lives and careers of brave black people who had served state and church since the Civil War. He was acutely conscious of the missed opportunities of Reconstruction, of the contradictions that could have been settled, of the innocent lives that could have been spared, a century before the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, had Americans following the Civil War only been willing to put racial healing and equal economic opportunity first.... Pinckney said, 'I think South Carolina has — and across the South we have — a deep appreciation of history. We haven't always had a deep appreciation of each other's histories. We have, you know, many reenactments across the state and sometimes in our General Assembly I feel that we're fighting some of the old battles.'

This past Wednesday was a reminder (there have been many reminders this year) that there has been no peace treaty for the old battles, yet.

I've read the protestations of facebook friends who proclaim "This is not the Charleston I know," or some variation thereof. I can't join their sentiments, for the racially-motivated killings this past Wednesday **are** an aspect, an outgrowth, of the Charleston I know. Not the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/opinion/henry-louis-gates-if-clementa-pinckney-had-lived.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/opinion/henry-louis-gates-if-clementa-pinckney-had-lived.html?_r=0)

one we proclaim. Not the one we try and sell to tourists (and to ourselves), but a deeper truth that can be seen imbedded in the economic and social fabric of the city, that, this week, has been brought to its knees in pain and grief.

Do the Charlestonians I know condone the murderous rampage, the terrorism committed at Emmanuel AME church this past Wednesday night? No. They are disgusted and saddened by it.

But are they (am I) willing to do the work to name our own complicity in the racism that led to the perpetrator's horrific act? Are they willing (am I willing) to both listen to and hear the truth-tellers and make the changes that are required to step into a more faithful future?

As one former classmate wrote on Facebook this past week, you only have to look at the surnames of some of those murdered while they gathered for worship (Middleton, Singleton, Simmons, Pinckney) to know that they are a part of a racial violence that is centuries old.

That's what I think about when I hear/read/speak/write my name, and now I add another thing to that, am I brave enough to live up to the potential in this name created by the Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney?

Just as time has told, time will tell.

*Anna Pinckney Straight*