

On Father's Day my family and I visited Bethel AME Church in Little Rock during their Sunday morning service. During the six years I was the deacon at Trinity Cathedral I had the privilege of developing a connection with this church only a few blocks from the cathedral. We planned services together to celebrate the integration of Central High School, we met monthly for dinner and discussed how to serve the community around our churches, we built and cared for a community garden together, we shared choirs and ministers, and celebrated in our homes. My heart has been broken since the tragic shooting in their mother church in Charleston, South Carolina, trying to know how to respond. I cried through most of their service Sunday. The music was gospel, the sermon up lifting; the reception by the congregations was amazingly warm. No one gave us a second look. They just loved on us the way you do here at St. Luke's. For part of the service around 40 members of the cathedral had walked down to Bethel. My prayer is that the cathedral will continue that ministry. It was a ministry where we learned rather than a ministry that we taught.

This is what I want to share with you about Bethel's minister's words. “ ***Our doors are still open.*** ” There were no armed guards, no policemen; all their doors were open. Even though they, more than any other church, could be targeted as another Bethel AME church for violence, they were not letting **fear** overcome **love**. They were not letting the awful tragedy to people they knew and loved turn them into the same fear based people that brought evil to their church. Dr. Jones talked about how we find evil on our streets, in our schools, in our homes, and unfortunately in the place that should be the safest haven, our churches. He preached about other evils besides killings in our churches, when we do not welcome others who are different, when we tell a stranger this is our seat, our pew. Another message was “***Hold On, God will care for us.***” He told how our God through the ages has redeemed tragedy in the lives of African Americans and in his life personally. This is my story as well, how tragic events in my life have been redeemed by God, a car accident when I was in medical school that changed the course of my life physically,

spiritually, and mentally where circumstances led to meeting my husband.

In Kate Alexander's sermon last Sunday at Christ Church she reminded us that in the gospel story in Mark that Jesus in the evening tells the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." Jesus is talking about taking their fishing boat across the Sea of Galilee over to a Gentile, a foreign territory. *"Jesus calls us to reach out to people on the other side of whatever systemic divisions we face, like the dividing lines of race and privilege, and to do so in love, in Jesus' name. A great storm occurs. The disciples call on Jesus, and Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' In other words, Jesus has authority over all demonic forces, be they possessions or whirlwinds. There is a power in Christ against the forces that seem too large for us to overcome. This is a good time to call on Jesus for help whenever we find ourselves perishing. Watching the heart breaking news of yet another shooting is one of those times. Jesus then turns back to the disciples and asks them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you*

*still no faith?’ Jesus does not say that there is nothing to be afraid of, just that we don’t need to be afraid. There is a strange comfort in that, whatever Goliath (evil) looms ahead. Fear is real, but it doesn’t have to be the place in our hearts from which we act. Jesus rebuked that kind of fear and preached peace. This is one of those lessons that takes a lifetime to learn. Reactionary fear is not our best motivator. It never is. Faith and peace are far better starting places in tumultuous times. “1*

Over 1000 people from Little Rock and North Little Rock crossed over to the other side and attended another service last Sunday night at Bethel AME in North Little Rock at 600 Cedar. My prayer is that in the next few months that Carey and I and some of the members of St. Luke’s may meet with members and the pastor of Bethel AME in North Little Rock to see how we can support them, but I am mostly wanting to learn from them, how people of great faith deal with such evil. Continually I have been humbled by their response. Let me know if you are interested in this ministry to the African American community.

1Kate Alexander, “6/21=Goliaths,” sermon Christ Church  
Little Rock, June 21, 2015.

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