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Touching Grace | June 28, 2015 | Mark 5
For First Congregational Church of Darien

I don't want to demonize the shooter.

I don't want to celebritize him, either.

It is not my place to raise the issues of white privilege or call for stricter gun control.

But we need to talk.

We need to talk about what happened in Charleston, SC in the house of the Lord.

And we need to seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as we grapple with what it means to be Christian... today... in the age of what some call domestic terrorism.

Let us pray.

It was a typical day at the nursing home last Wednesday:

As a chaplain, I am entrusted with such a sacred job. I get to be with people at their most vulnerable and talk about the elephant in the room—death.

And so, there I was, heading to the room of a patient.

I head down the carpeted hallway, which smells like mothballs and vegetables. I put hand sanitizer on my hands, and I started to enter the room.

Just then, a woman, who was not on hospice and therefore was not my patient, said “You-hoo!!!”

So I look down, and there's a woman in a wheelchair, as many nursing home residents are.

“My, you're tall!”

I get this a lot.

“You must be a doctor!”

I get that a lot, too... so I have no idea what she's thinking.

I reply: “No, I'm actually a chaplain.”

“A who?”

“A chaplain. Like a minister or something...”

“Would you pray for me?”

And just like that, in a moment, a rather silly conversation turns into something sacred.

It was a lot like that with Jesus as he was crossing to the other side of the sea in his boat.

He had just finished calming the storm and casting out demons, and he even told the young man not to tell anyone of the miracle he accomplished... but word got around to the other side of the sea before Jesus could even land the boat.

And so, there he was, docking in a place that smelled like fish and wood... tying his boat to the hitch and carefully maintaining his balance while stepping out.

He puts hand sanitizer on his hands and heads up the shore.

Just then, a man says, "You-hoo!!!"

And then he says, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

And just like that, a mundane moment turns into something sacred.

So he heads over to see the man's daughter.

But then, another interruption. This one was also severe. This one pointed to a problem which had existed for years and years and years... and went unaddressed.

The person carrying the weight of this burden tolerated the problem for years and years and years... until it reached a point at which she could no longer live with it.

I'm going to pause right here.

Because we are at exactly this point in American life right now.

Here we were, gearing up towards the upcoming Presidential campaign season... until the Charleston Massacre occurred in a house of worship... and then suddenly, the national dialogue shifted to a problem that we have been tolerating for years and years and years... until it reached a point at which we could no longer live with it.

Suddenly, Facebook newsfeeds explode with fights about the Confederate Battle Flag.

Then there were Facebook fights about gun ownership and gun safety... and accusation that the nice people who died in that church deserved to die because they were unarmed.

Then the news channels tried to make the shooting about mental illness rather than hate, even after the shooter's manifesto came to light a few days after the Massacre.

Then some news channels argued that this was a case of domestic terrorism, and people on the other side of the issue were confronted with the fact that they normally think of terrorists as Muslim.

Then what does this say about how we view Muslims?

And was this one hate-filled guy, or was this a reflection of institutional racism?

In other words, it has been a very painful week and a half for this country.

We all stand united behind the fact that this mass-murder never should have taken place, let alone in a church.

But it happened. And it happened to black Christians.

And now, as Christians of different racial and ethnic affiliations, we are obliged to grapple with this outrage.

We are angry, distraught, confused, troubled, scared; we feel powerless... and perhaps that is why people are fighting so hard against the Confederate Battle Flag right now—because it is the only productive measure we feel we can take at this time of feeling powerless.

Did you hear about the woman who climbed the flag poll at the South Carolina capital? She removed the flag. Only to find that the state forced two black men to replace the flag—full staff.

Whether we like it or not, we all benefit from privilege. Most of us live in Connecticut, where private schools and luxury vehicles are common. We benefit from living on this land, which was not ours to take from the American Indians, yet we remain here. Yes, this is our home now, but this is their home, too.

Often, ministers read poems at the end of their sermons, but I want to share this with you in the middle of my sermon, because we're going to need to unpack it.

THE DEATH OF AMERICAN INNOCENCE

By a ministry colleague, Tess Baumberger.

Innocence does not die at once, in that first raptured thrust.

It dies in each small seduction, in every subsequent acquiescence.

American innocence did not die in that bright flashing terrorist act,

it dwindled breath by breath, in great and tiny acts of terror:

It died with every smallpox blanket sold to an Indian village,

with every arrogantly greed-wrested acre,

with every language and culture that disappeared,

it died on the Trail of Tears.

*It died with every African shackled and torn from homeland, family,
with every auction block sale of humanity,
it died in the Middle Passage.*

*It died with every civil rights activist beaten or killed,
with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers
it died in Montgomery and Selma and Little Rock.*

*It died with Roosevelt's refusal to accept Jews fleeing the Nazis,
it died with every black man sent first to the front lines
it died with two atomic weapons dropped upon Japan,
One hundred and seventy thousand lives lost in two great flashing instants.*

*It dies with every chemical weapon developed,
with every nuclear test, wherever it happens,
with every bomb or jail built instead of a school.*

*It dies with every KKK rally and every single lynching,
with every man searched by police because he's black,
with every man beaten by officers,
with every child who witnesses or perpetuates gang warfare,
it dies with every racist or sexist or homophobic or anti-Semitic joke.*

*It dies with every bombed synagogue, mosque, temple,
with every black church burned,
with every abortion clinic bombed,
with every hate-filled word or deed.*

*It dies with every sweatshop built on a poorer country's soil,
with every product bought, made by a political prisoner,
with every homeless person,
with every starving despairing child.*

Oh, innocence never dies at once, only delusion does.

Just... wow...

May we open our eyes to our past delusions.

So where is hope?

The Gospel is a good place to look.

Because in it, Jesus stops.

Jesus is on his way to heal a little girl, but he stops in his tracks and wonders who touched him.

The disciples were like, “Jesus, I mean, come on, there are a thousand people here glorifying your name, and you’re worried about **one** of the hands that touched you?”

Then the woman who had been bleeding for years and years and years came, in fear and trembling, and laid herself down at His feet.

And Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

Friends, it is in times like these that we notice the bleeding, the hemorrhaging, the growing pains, the hurt, the strife.

We are aware of how people are unfairly targeted.

And just like Jesus walked through the crowd of people to do something miraculous, we were on the verge of great things as a religion.

And just like people were proclaiming the reign of God on earth and looking to Him, so too people are looking to the Christian Church at this moment in history.

They are wondering: how are the Christians going to lead us through Charleston?

And just as the woman threw herself at the feet of Jesus, so too, people are throwing themselves at the Christian Church—in fear and trembling—begging to be loved. Pleading for compassion and mercy. Waiting for the hand of Jesus to be extended to them.

I'll tell you who: it's every group mentioned in the poem from earlier.

It's not just Black and White relations. In the same way that Jesus had a thousand people clamoring for his attention and proclaiming the reign of God, there are dozens of groups that Christians need to show the Love of God to.

Let me ask you this: who is in need in this community, and are they in this room right now? What groups are in the news recently, and is this church doing anything to welcome them in this sacred place?

The Gospel message is clear: when they come to us, and touch the hem of our garment, we bless them.

Even if we are busy trying to do something else, we bless them.

Even when it is not convenient, we bless them.

Even when it is not expedient, we bless them.

We are called to leave our comfort zone to bring healing to the wounded... and to associate with everyone we meet along the way, outside these church walls. That is our earth-bound duty.

I hope we make it easy for people to feel welcome in this church, and to graft onto the branch of our church other under-represented groups and races that seek spiritual refuge here. What great faith they have to come to our congregations and stay a part of our communities!

It will always be difficult to choose to walk in God's way. But that's what we were created for.

Last week was a joyous week for some... and a trial of our faith for others. For most of us, it was bitter-sweet.

We saw the confederate flag starting to come down, and a major trade deal come through.

Marriage equality became the law of the land, and women's rights were not affirmed in full.

Kuwait mourns another mosque attack in which 27 people died and another 227 Shia were injured, and the Affordable Healthcare Act upheld.

For the political left, there were victories; for the right, there were triumphs; and for the world, there were devastating losses.

The issue here is not whether this church will align with the political left or right—but rather, “how / will / we / love?”

Will we be so task-oriented and so insular, focusing on the church budget, and carpet cleaning, and the paint on the walls... or will we take the “both/and approach” of Jesus?

We need to work on the budget... yes... and we need to love LGBT people.

We need to take care of carpet cleaning and the paint on the walls... and we need to reverse generations of oppression of women.

We need to make sure the flower committee and coffee hour crew serve effectively... and we need to decry politically-motivated violence done in the name of God.

This is our model for ministry.

We do our thing, and we love individuals and groups in the way that Jesus loved them.

How did Jesus love individuals and groups?

- He loved sinners and tax-collectors... by dining with them.
- He loved lepers—who people avoided on the streets—by gently laying his hands on their cheek.
- He loved prostitutes... by speaking to them in broad daylight and saying “great is your faith!”
- And, each time he did one of these unremarkable acts, he made himself an abomination in the eyes of Levitical Law—abomination meaning only ceremonially unclean. He knew he would lose his standing in the rabbinic community by touching lepers, touching bleeding women, dining with sinners, and consorting with prostitutes. But he did it!

So what if people tell us we are bad Christians for loving LGBT people? It’s what we are commanded to do!

What if people shame us when we say we support the Equal Rights Amendment? We are called to love all people and to raise them from the dead—just like Jesus did for the little girl.

And back to the original illustration: what if people say we’re just too radical when we challenge peoples’ notions of racism or privilege? That we’re over the top for suggesting the Charleston Massacre was racially motivated, and that this points to a systemic problem?

There’s a phrase my friends say: “haters gonna gate.”

And they will. **The question is, are we going to be obedient to the “good news” of Jesus Christ, or will we be controlled by other humans who just don’t get it?**

I don’t know about you, but I’m willing to be called an abomination—ceremonially unclean—or any other name if it means I am being obedient to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let this narrative be our compass. As we go out into the world from this place, may we be more loving, more gentle, and more compassionate to others.

We are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ. Our touch of grace becomes an act of the Divine—through us.

And if people just don't get what we're up to, just remember that phrase, 'haters gonna hate.' Cuz they gonna. Ah, but our gift is love.