

## Shall We Be Disciples?

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19  
Psalm 85:8-13  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6:14-29

The massacre in Charleston South Carolina invades our nation in a way that will not be ignored.

A young white man is welcomed into the sacred hour set aside to study Holy Scripture; he sits with these saints of African American heritage for over an hour, and then, unspeakably, pulls out a gun and takes nine lives.

Sadly, the story of the massacre is not unique in our nation.

It happens with a regularity that is as appalling as it is preventable.

But the power of this story belongs not to the young white man who committed this atrocity against our black friends and neighbors, but to the families and the survivors of the senseless attack.

Pouring out grief and shock at the young man's bail hearing, those survivors and families of the slain expressed their profound pain; and yet, drawing upon the power that had them at that Bible Study in the first place, forgave the fellow human being who inflicted the carnage — and the power of that forgiveness has sent a relic of hatred and racism, yes, the Stars and Bars, the Confederate Flag, if not into the dustbin of history, at least into a museum's display case, where it shall no longer wave on public land as a symbol of slavery and white pride and segregation.

Forgiveness did that.

It unleashed a power that years of dreary political debate and demonstrations and angry cries for justice could not and did not accomplish.

Forgiveness did that.

So it has been with some interest that I've been reading now for days how so many parishioners and even clergy are starting to challenge the forgiveness shown by those directly affected by this crime.

A clergyman is quoted as saying that his church spends tens of thousands of dollars on security to keep himself and his congregation safe.

"My congregation and my family have a right to have us return home after worship," he said on Wednesday.

When asked whether he felt such efforts are consistent with what Jesus teaches, he said: "there weren't any guns in Jesus' day."

Another long respected civil rights worker is quoted as saying that while she understood and appreciated the sentiment expressed by the forgivers, she disagreed with them for doing so; saying it merely reflected the extent to which African Americans had been beaten down in that city.

All of which brings the chickens home to roost for all of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus.

How we respond to violence is at the very heart of our faith, and yet, with the rarest of exceptions, such as the saints of Charleston, we Christians look pretty much like everyone else when it comes to the question of violence: and the question today is: can we change?

There's no better person to help wrestle with that question than John the Baptist; the voice crying out for change, crying out for repentance, first in the wilderness, now in Herod's cold, damp, jail cell, as he listens to the riotous party going on above him.

He can't know that Herod's wife (who is both the ex-wife of Herod's brother and Herod's own niece — the smell of incest is everywhere!) — John can't know she is at this very moment planning to have his head.

And shortly she shall have it — and John submits — refusing to return violence with violence.

John's story mirrors what is waiting for Jesus.

Like John, Jesus is condemned by a man who would rather not do the deed.

Like John, a man in power gives in to pressure from people who have their own hidden agenda.

Like John, Jesus does not resist, but submits to the violence imposed.

And out of that submission, **which is forgiveness incarnate**, there is a power set free that is beyond all imagination.

John's ministry isn't killed by Herod, it blossoms through the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus isn't stopped because of his grisly death, he is raised and his voice is heard in hundreds of languages all around the world.

And the martyrs of Charleston are not silenced by hate, but instead, hearts in South Carolina are softened to understand how symbols like that flag can hurt and destroy.

This is the power of forgiveness; the power of non-violence; the power of love that will die rather than kill.

It is a power that stays concealed unless we cooperate in its release; and we cooperate in its release by forgiving, by refusing an eye for an eye, by absorbing the hurt and hate and anger — allowing the power of God to do something new.

It's why Mark sticks this story of John's death in between Jesus sending out his disciples two by two (which we were part of last week) and next week's gospel — when those same disciples return — rejoicing at the power unleashed by the God of reconciliation.

Mark puts the story of John's death in between those two bookends because it's not only John and Jesus who face the specter of persecution and death, but everyone who dares live out the absurd wisdom of the God of peace.

The earliest followers of God, like King David, thought, wrongly, that bloody sacrifice was required by God.

Only later, through the prophets, did they come to understand that it isn't killing that God requires, whether the killing of another human being or the killing of an animal, but instead, what God requires is justice, compassion, humility and mutual love.

Listen to them for just a moment:

To Hosea:

"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."  
Hosea 6:6.

To the Psalmist:

"For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise...." Psalm 51:16-17

To Isaiah:

"I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. \*\*\* [But] learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." Is. 1:17.

God really is so different from me.

Many say that God's way is totally unrealistic in the world we live in, what with hate crimes and terrorists and just run of the mill bad guys out to hurt for the pure sake of hurting.

What choice do we have but to arm ourselves? to fight back? to protect those we love?

Certainly God gives us the freedom to do just that.

And yet.....as St Paul reminds us today, we are called to a different course, and to a different destiny:

“Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds.

And not just barely free, either.

Abundantly free!

He thinks of everything, provides for everything we can possibly need, letting us in on the plans he takes such delight in making.

He sets it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything is brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on mother earth.”  
Eph 1:7-13.

In other words, whether we are healthy or sick, whether we are happy or in mourning, whether we are alive or dead, everything is already worked out.

We don’t need to do it.

We don’t need to fix it.

God has done it for us — and all we need to do is live our lives in that truth, and participate in the overflowing abundance of God’s forgiveness — being peacemakers in a world that so desperately needs to hear the gentle word of reconciliation: letting its power loose — letting its power transform hearts and minds and yes, even Confederate flags.

This is our faith!

This is our heritage!

Thanks be to God!

+amen

