

God, Life, and Everything

3 Words on Charleston

I wrote this article for our parish newsletter this week but feel it is appropriate for the wider community.

You have all seen the news of the horrendous shootings at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I always hate to rush to judgment or jump on the commenter bandwagon when it comes to tragedies or sensitive situations.

On the other hand, to say nothing is unacceptable when a pastoral, gospel-oriented word is required.

The first word is grief. We grieve with the families of those who lost their loved ones. There is no way to express such grief when a loved one is murdered. Please pray for the souls of the victims - and for the soul of the murderer, that he may be changed by Christ's eternal love.

The second word is chilling. The fact that it took place in a church strikes us close to home. We can all imagine being in the church or chapel for a worship service or bible study. The fact that he sat with them for an hour before opening fire chills me to the bone.

The third word is outrage. I've been in touch with friends from that area, and with many black friends around the country who have been talking about this incident. Outrage comes on many levels:

1. Outrage that some have said this was not a racist attack. It was reported on at least one news show that this was an attack on Christianity rather than on blacks. In another, it was suggested that the young man was probably mentally ill. This, despite the perpetrator's own words (as reported by a survivor) and his donning apparel bearing flags of former white supremacist governments worn today by such groups as the Aryan Nation.

Going further, we must recognize that this lone attack does not come out of thin air. It's not just a single madman. His hatred was fed by centuries of animosity, of contempt for and fear of blacks. The fear and contempt is apparent all over our country. This is bigger than one person and it is about race.

2. Outrage at a double standard. All over the social media, you will find countless images of the young man in a bullet-proof vest being casually led to a car (he was arrested while holding a loaded .45 caliber pistol, though he did not resist arrest). On FaceBook, Twitter, and Instagram, I have seen this photo posted next the images of unarmed (and innocent in some cases) black people being tackled and slammed to the ground.

Are these fair comparisons? I don't know. But in the last years and months, the news has been full of incidents where innocent and unarmed black people are shot even while complying with police commands. If I were a black person in the United States, I would feel some outrage at the relatively gentle way this murderer of nine people was treated.

3. Outrage that there has been yet another mass shooting in a country where mass shootings are becoming commonplace. This outrage is not limited to the black community alone but across the country. This ought to be our own outrage, too. The murderer had just received the murder weapon as a birthday present for his 21st birthday.

We have to ask ourselves as Christians how to combat this warped and UNChristian idea that a weapon intended to kill other children of God is ever a good idea. Sure, target shooting is fun, sure, hunting has value. But to have guns for "self-protection" is a moral, a spiritual issue. Those who make self protection a goal miss the self-offering of the gospel, the message of Christ to "pick up your cross and follow."

To choose the path of love rather than fear and hate (and a handgun kept at home for "protection" can only signal fear and/or hate), is our dangerous path. That's why we keep our churches open when insurance companies beg us to lock them up.

Episcopal Bishop Chip Stokes of New Jersey's wrote in response to the shootings: "In the wake of the massacre at Emanuel Church in Charleston, some will be inclined to withdraw in fear; to close and lock the doors of our church buildings and to shut out the stranger. This is not the response Jesus Christ or his gospel calls us to. Fear is contrary to faith. As scripture tells us, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). As people of faith, our response should not be to withdraw and hide, but rather to step forward and reach out in love; to be bold in our witness to the gospel and to our Lord, who is the Prince of Peace."

For my part, I ask you to pray for the victims of this murder. Their names are: Clementa Pinckney (the senior pastor at the church), Sharonda Coleman Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Cynthia Hurd, Myra Thompson, Daniel Simmons Sr., DePayne Middleton Doctor.

I ask you to pray for the soul of this nation as well. I know all the statistics used by gun advocates as well as gun control advocates, by racists and by civil rights leaders. There is no need to quote them again. But we can all recognize that something is not right here - that the growing sense of injustice and despair is not the will of God.

Each one of these victims is your brother or sister. Each of those who arm themselves against perceived threats (often becoming threats themselves) is nevertheless your brother or sister. Until all are reconciled, the work of the Kingdom of God is not over. So let us pray and pray unceasingly that we can be bearers of the light of Christ in dark times.