

Uncaring Christ?

Mark 4:35-41

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“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38)

Soon after the news broke in Charleston Thursday morning, I saw a picture of a woman named Surreace Cox standing at a prayer vigil near Emanuel AME Church. She was heartbroken, tears flooding her face, and she was holding a one-word sign. The sign asked a question: *Why?*

There have been over 60 mass shootings in our country since 1982, just over three decades. I looked it up. Regardless of how you feel about guns and their proper or improper use, we need to have a new national conversation. Christians like us need to be part of that conversation. We cannot continue with this violence as a new normal—we who follow a man named Jesus and call him Lord, his teachings informing our opinions on these matters most centrally.

And this particular shooting in Charleston is doubly-bizarre and tragic because it was racially motivated. Don't let anyone tell you it was only just another mentally ill person with a gun. As if “only” is any sort of healthy descriptor. Dyllan Roof is a troubled young man, of course. But he was also motivated by racial hatred; he had been marinated and schooled in racial bigotry for a long time. He did not drive up to a church randomly in downtown Charleston and decide to kill nine people. The church's pastor, our esteemed state senator, was vocal in the movement to equip all law enforcement officers with body cameras after a black man was brutally killed in North Charleston by a white policeman. Emanuel AME Church has a long history of community activism. This shooting was not random. It was intentional and planned rage against a race of people.

But please do not think Dyllan Roof is alone in his convictions. Or that we're somehow past this as a nation. He isn't. And we're not. Go to the website of the Southern Poverty Law Center when you get a moment. Part of their work involves tracking hate groups in our country—racist separatist groups who mean business. Several exist right here in South Carolina, actively recruiting young people like Dyllan Roof. And even worse perhaps, collectively, is the tolerance of the racial slur and the racial joke and the racial innuendo. For the life of me I cannot remember so many jokes aimed at any President of our country—far more than the number of prayers offered up for him I suspect. I've stopped believing that this has nothing to do with the color of his skin.

Nine people are dead this morning. Several pastors, two of them graduates of our Lutheran seminary in Columbia. A state senator. Three dads on this Father's Day. A librarian. A community organizer. Key leaders in the city. Regardless of how we parse the meaning of these deaths and how we might now proceed together, I suspect we all agree with the sentiment expressed on that one-word sign held up at the Charleston prayer vigil: *Why?* It's one of the most honest prayers in the Bible.

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Our gospel lesson opens this morning with Jesus and company trying to cross the lake “to the other side.” Jesus is on the water a lot in the gospels. And it always seems like he and the boys face lots of wind and rain and resistance. Why in the world doesn’t Jesus just stay home? You might know that there are two sides of the sea that Jesus tries to cross—a Jewish side and a Gentile side. The sea was not that wide, nautically speaking, but racially speaking, the two sides of the sea were worlds apart. Jesus doesn’t stay at home on his side of the sea because he understands his mission.

In some powerful and elemental and metaphorical way, we should all pay close attention to the theological meaning of these watery crossings. You surely don’t need me to help you make the connection that all this water flying around in this lesson should make us all think of our baptisms and how we’re now called to “walk wet” as a result of our dying and rising in Christ. “Neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white.” Baptism washes away racial division. Baptism supplies our lifetime marching orders. Baptism invites us to stay in the boat that is the church and welcome more people into the boat on the other side. Baptism is not some holy inoculation into the next life. Baptism is our blueprint for this life.

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Our family had some friends in town several Sundays ago, and we took them to Arby’s for lunch after worship. Our daughter, Marta, was up from Anderson for the day. Marta was born in El Salvador. Her ancestors are undoubtedly Mayan. Marta’s been with our family, our daughter, since she was 11 months old. Several years ago we learned that the orphanage where she lived as a baby was completely destroyed in an earthquake. Children died as a result.

We settled into our turkey sandwiches. An older man walked up, looked at Marta with confusion, looked at us, and then said with some volume, “Now whar’s *she* from?”

I’m pretty sure this man intended no malice. It came off as rude, for sure, but no intentional malice; at least I don’t think so. We told him where she was from, answering him geographically. He went back to his table and his own sandwich. It was a rather awkward moment. Looking back on that encounter, I wish we’d answered another way. I wish we’d said, “She’s from God, by water and his word.”

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A storm arises for the disciples out there on the sea. Baptism (properly understood) will lead one into storms and winds of resistance. If you’ve never experienced resistance or pushback in your faith life, then you may have a theologically-corrupt understanding of baptism. The teachings and actions of Jesus raise a ruckus. He’s trying to unite different racial sides of the sea, and people won’t like it. Please don’t miss this about him.

But there’s more. As the waves lap over the boat, the disciples bailing frantically, Jesus seems to be able to sleep through just about anything—his head even cushioned on a pillow. “How about a glass of sherry, Jesus? Maybe an Andes mint atop your fluffy pillow?” The juxtaposition between the sleeping peace of Jesus and the frantic bailing of his disciples gives rise to one of the most poignant questions in the gospels: “Teacher, *don’t you care* that we’re all about to die here? Don’t you give a fig that we’re all destined for Davy Jones’ Locker?” It’s a rather loaded question the disciples pose to their sleeping Lord, “Don’t you care about us?”

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And so we're back (consistently back, if we're honest) to that poignant one-word sign held up by Surreace Cox at the prayer vigil last Thursday morning outside Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston: *why?* Why do these things happen? Why do so many people die in our world so meaninglessly and senselessly? Where is Jesus anyway? Don't you care about us?

Watch Jesus here. With everyone in the boat losing their heads in the storm, he's able to sleep even in the midst of great anxiety and fear. He will not allow the great anxiety and fear to dictate the nature of his faith. He will not allow the swirling and accusatory reactions of others to keep him from proceeding to the other side. His own questions to his disciples should ring clearly all the way to Charleston and back. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

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They killed him on a Friday for trying to cross over one too many times. They killed him on a Friday because he challenged and bucked the status quo. They killed him on a Friday because his ideas about love and mercy and inclusion were just too threatening for too many. They killed him on a Friday because he would not stay with his own kind.

But he rose again on a Sunday. He rose again and proved that no fear and no threat and no earthly power and not even death itself would have the last say. And if all this is true, people of God, the question comes back to us. And the question is not really "Why?" It's the divine question from the boat: "*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*"