

## Way Past Time

### End Racism – Proper 18, Year B – James 2:1-10

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 6, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Sitting in the hospital with Jenny all week, doing very little except waiting for the next group of medications or check of vital signs, but pretty much unable to think about anything except what the central monitoring station was reading from the electrodes recording the rhythm of her heart, I had pretty much decided that y'all would have to settle for a short, off-the-cuff comment on this morning's reading from James' letter. I had decided that this morning I would just talk for a moment more about the idea that I touched on last week, that having faith without backing it up with works is pretty useless stuff.

Then, late in the week, I finally got around to reading a Tuesday email from the Diocese, forwarding a so-called *Letter to the Church*, jointly signed by the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies, asking us all to join our brothers and sisters of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the AME Church, *this Sunday*, in deliberately addressing our commitment as people of faith to end racism. "Our history as a church," the letter says in part, "includes atrocities for which we must repent, saints who show us the way toward the realm of God, and structures that bear witness to unjust centuries of the evils of white privilege, systemic racism, and oppression that are not yet consigned to history." "Racism will not end with the passage of legislation alone," the letter quotes AME Bishop Reginald T. Jackson, "it will also require a change of heart and thinking." "This is an effort," he concludes, "which the *faith* community must lead, and be the conscience of the nation."

As most of you know, that is a task for which I have a heart, and sometimes even a voice. But as the week got still more complicated, and my heart and mind were devoted to *another* calling, I feared that I simply did not have the resources *left* to prepare a sermon that could adequately give voice to such a task *this Sunday*. And then last evening, as Jenny and I were finally settling back into our little haven on the corner of Center and Ingram, it finally hit me: I had *already* preached that sermon.

On June 17, nine people were murdered at their Wednesday prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In case you've forgotten, their names are: the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41 years old; Cynthia Hurd, 54; the Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, 45; Tywanza Sanders, 26; Ethel Lance, 70; Susie Jackson, 87; Depayne Middleton Doctor, 49; the Rev. Daniel Simmons, 74; and Myra Thompson, 59.

At a hearing that *Friday*, their relatives were given the opportunity to address the court. Nearly all of them addressed the *gunman* instead. One after another, their message was simple, "I forgive you." With a lot of people, I wondered at how soon after such a profound tragedy these people were able to reach, even beyond their own grief, to forgiveness. And then it occurred to me that maybe it is time for *us* to forgive. I'm not talking about forgiving just the racist gunman in South Carolina. Maybe it's time for us to forgive – period.

You may remember that in the Epistle reading *that Sunday*, St. Paul quotes God's promise through the prophet Isaiah, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." "See, now is the acceptable time!"

Maybe it's time to forgive those we delight to read about, those we glue our eyes to on the TV, those we click on, and click on, and click on, those whose deeds of violence, or decadence, or *perversity* we lap up as entertainment, and *feed* on to fuel our outrage and to confirm our own prejudices toward that ethnic group, or that religion, or that race. Maybe instead of spending so much of our time watching and viewing and following and liking and sharing, maybe it's time to *forgive* the hate and the greed and the

depravity, and *break* the hold of their practitioners on our own life. Maybe it's time to forgive – period. “See, now is the acceptable time!”

And while we're at it, maybe it's time to forgive those that we feel have insulted our sense of order, or our personal points of privilege, the ones whose order is marginalized by the institution of *our* order, whose security is weakened or even *negated* by the institution of *our* security, whose privilege is *denied* by the institution of *our* privilege, whose outrage is fed, and sometimes fanned to flame, by *our* outrage. Maybe it's time to forgive – period. “See, now is the acceptable time!”

And then maybe it's time for us to *seek* forgiveness: For *our* part in the institutionalization of our order and our security and our privilege. For *our* appropriation of what we have considered a right of our birth, or our station, or our ability to pay. For our grasping natures and our seeming obsession with accumulation. For our “keeping up with the Joneses,” and for our trying to outdo them. Maybe it's time that we *seek* forgiveness – period. “See, now is the acceptable time!”

Every *day*, every *hour*, every *minute* of time is our opportunity to forgive and be forgiven. Every *moment* of time has been created for us to choose to feed the power of division and destruction and despair, to love our Creator and to love one another. Every *instant* of time is a singularity of *decision*, a chance for us to choose whether we will follow that path of destruction, or seek the path of forgiveness and love. “See, *now*,” St. Paul tells us, “*now* is the acceptable time!” See, now, it's way *past* time.

The *Letter to the Church* concludes by quoting Resolution C019 of the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, held just a few days after the abomination in Charleston: “The Church understands and affirms that the call to pray and act for racial reconciliation is integral to our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to our living into the demands of our Baptismal Covenant.” But y'all know that I much prefer prayer to resolutions, so let me quote from the *Prayer Book* instead. Let us pray.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move *every* human heart, and especially the hearts of the people of this land, and especially the hearts of the people of this Church, and especially the hearts of the people of this Parish family, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being *healed*, we may live in justice *and* in peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.