

How do we live the Gospel Story

“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although He was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.”

I was speaking with someone this week about the murders at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church Wednesday 17th. I've known the person for more than 15 years. He is a deeply spiritual but not religious person. He spoke of how he was impacted by the powerful act of the grieved families and congregation Emanuel AME Church in forgiving Dylann Storm Roof. Their action touched in at the depth of his being. Their action woke something within him, something he believed about Christianity but rarely experienced; Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is meant to be lived. As a result of their remarkable act of faith filled forgiveness something shifted in his own soul. He described an opening to consciousness, a mindful awareness, a being more fully present in every interaction with every black person he meets. In listening to him I rejoiced at the mighty healing and work of God effected through Emanuel AME as individuals and as a congregation. The boldness of their choice to forgive is incarnational just as surely as the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary. They have embodied the power of Jesus in their act of forgiveness.

Their ability and willingness to forgive shows the power and strength of each individual and of an entire congregation that is nurtured, shaped and formed in unshakeable faith in Jesus' love, of the lived history and experience of God with them through the tribulations, humiliations and micro-aggressions because of their race.

Maybe you heard someone from Charleston speaking of AME as I had: When asked what they thought about their forgiving Dylann Roof, the person responded: “Of course, that is Emmanuel AME, that is who they are.” The people not of this congregation, the people in the general community of Charleston have come to expect something of Emanuel AME church because the church has created that expectation by the way they live. This comment, indeed this testimony, tells us that the character of Emanuel AME is one of grace, gratitude and generosity. This choice to forgive rather than the react and seek revenge and hate flows from the core of their being in the midst of indescribable pain and grief. In this time of testing and trial their act of forgiveness testifies to all who Jesus is for them; the one in whom they blessed assurance.

Their forgiving Dylann Storm Roof reminds every Christian that “while we were yet sinners, Jesus came and gave his life for us, redeemed us, saved us.” He accomplished our salvation by his emptying himself accepting suffering and death.

In the midst of the violence done to them this congregation has turned horrified hearts of our nation to hope by living the gospel. There was No Need to call in the National Guard, or a curfew because there was No violence. Their readiness to forgive created such a silence which resounded loudly, there was no opportunity for anyone to react with violence. No demonstrations, no protests because they demonstrate that it is faith not fear, forgiveness not fists that is the Christian way.

I believe a question on many a heart is: how did the grieved on Emanuel AME church come to a place that in the depth of anguish they could say in effect: I will not hate!? I will pray for the one who murdered my loved ones. How did one family member in grief and pain

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cared beyond their own grief for the soul of the murder and pleading with Dylann Storm Roof to accept Jesus, turn his life over and repent?

I believe that it was no accident or quirk of fate that this critical battle between God and the Enemy of Humanity in America called racism happened in the midst of this congregation. I believe that God has been at work in this congregation for a very long time, through many generations working with and through them and their working with God. I believe they were being prepared for a time of tribulation after all the trials and tests they have had and continue to endure as Black persons. In their response of forgiveness they have shown all of us what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray, "Your Kingdom Come, Your will be done." Their radical act forgiveness is the Kingdom Come, the Kingdom here and now, in the doing of God's will. That is kingdom living, this is what it looks like, this is what it costs.

How did they come to learn who they are in Jesus that they could forgive as they did? One way surely was doing on that evening what they have done on every Wednesday evening gather to pray, hear God's word, discover what God asks of them, challenging and being challenged by God's Word in a community of faith. How else could they have discovered the grace of Jesus in the center of their life together?

In today's gospel passage we hear two stories of Jesus healing. And typically preachers speak on one or both of these healings. But that is not what I am looking at today. I am looking at what we don't hear the story. We don't hear what happened after – we don't hear a story of grace, gratitude or generosity. We don't hear the story of changed lives. We don't hear the story of the difference Jesus made in their lives. These stories of healing are then as now signs of the power of Jesus to heal, restore to wholeness anything and everything that is disordered in our lives. So what do we do with this story so it doesn't sit there unfinished? We finish it! That is what we are going to begin to do right now.

If you are comfortable close your eyes. Remember a time in the past when there was something so deeply painful in your life that only Jesus could heal and you found healing. Remember the grace, feel it again.

- What did you do after you experienced the healing? Who did you tell? How did you express the gratitude for what Jesus has done for you?
- How does your life continue to be one of generosity now?
- When you are ready open your eyes.

I hope each of you felt the grace, experienced gratitude and could consider how this manifests in generosity in your life. Generosity is the embodiment of gratitude and gratitude is a response to unmerited grace. Grace is living unmoved in the deep conviction, the assurance that Jesus became poor that we might become rich through his poverty. The Christian walk requires a commitment to hear the stories and finish the stories in our lives. The Christian walk requires profound courage, a willingness to reach down deep and Act in his name rather than react. The Christian walk is to be filled with grace, gratitude and generosity when the blood of a loved one is spilled at their feet.

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We are seeing how Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church is living the gospel story. How will we as individuals and as a congregation live the Gospel story? How does grace, gratitude and generosity manifest in our lives as individuals and as community? How do we want to be known in the community of Tarrytown? Do we want someone in the wider community say of us, “Of course Christ Church and San Marcos did that, that’s who they are.”