

Community of Reconciliation

sermon digest

June 28, 2015

Acts 9:1-20
carolyn dipboye

The South Carolina tragedy that took place just over a week ago is a tragedy that will not let us go. Over the last ten days we have come to know something of the victims. Nine in all, including three men and six women, ranging in age from 26 to 87, they included a young pastor/state senator, a girls' track coach, a recent college graduate, a librarian and housing rights activist, a university admissions counselor, a church sexton, a retired pastor, and guests from surrounding churches. We've chuckled at the young man, who at the ripe old age of 13 experienced a call to preach. Standing before an audience of hundreds of African Methodist Episcopal pastors a few months later, he presented himself as a candidate for ministerial training. When the bishop of South Carolina asked what he hoped to become, the young man did not hesitate. "A humble bishop of the A.M.E. church," he answered, with no hint of a smile. "People were trying to keep a straight face," a pastor who was present reported. "But the laughter could not be restrained" [*New York Times*, June 26, 2015].

We've learned of the member of the Emmanuel Church ministerial staff who also served as a girls' track coach. She ran alongside the girls to encourage them and sought in her relationship with them to instill a sense of hope and expectation for the future.

We've learned of a young man who put himself between the gunman and his elderly aunt and tried to talk the gunman into putting his gun on the table. Both the young man and his aunt were killed. Having worked full time as a barber to put himself through school, this same young man had recently graduated from college at the age of 26 and was researching scholarships in hope of going on to graduate school.

Mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and siblings. Each had a story cut short. Each represented an irreplaceable loss. The pain was real and it was deep. We all were moved as the story unfolded.

Perhaps most moving of all, however, was the church community's response. One by one, family and church members spoke words of forgiveness. We would not have blamed them had they done otherwise. Their words went a long way in disarming a situation which could have turned violent. Their words ministered to those of us who heard them and kept grief rather than angry retribution front and center. More than just reflections of their own natural predispositions, their actions, their demeanor, their clinging to "determined hope," as one commentator put it, have left us with the impression that what we have encountered is a witness of faith. Kept by the grace they had encountered in one another and in the God who had met them in Christ, they met the disaster visited upon them with a graciousness that had been nurtured over time.

Encountered by grace, we are enabled to extend grace. Come and walk alongside me this morning, if you will, as we again traverse the road to Damascus. Our companion, you will know as the man we call Paul. We first meet him under his Semitic name (Saul) rather than his Latin name (Paul). Luke, traditionally the author of Acts, lets us know in no uncertain terms that this man poses a real and imminent threat. Introduced as he approvingly stands by as the beloved Stephen is martyred, Saul goes about his task of restraining people of "the Way" with particular gusto, "ravaging the church . . . entering house after house; dragging . . . men and women . . . to prison" (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 2-3). Incensed that clamping down on the church has resulted in its being scattered throughout the region and "breathing threats and murder," he sought and gained authorization to go to Damascus where, "if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (8:1, 2). Doggedly setting his feet to the Damascus Road, he experiences a vision of Jesus which, as you know, changes the course of his life.

We know Saul/Paul's conversion story well, but have we thought very much about the second, more risky conversion of Ananias and the small band of believers in Damascus? Receiving instructions in his own vision to go to the impaired and waiting Paul, Ananias voices legitimate concern: "Lord, I have heard about the evil this man has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and he is here in Damascus with authority to carry us all away to prison" (9:13). In oft repeated biblical fashion, Ananias is met again with the commission: "Go." Ananias went and arriving at the house where Paul was, embraced his dread enemy as "Brother." Barnabas, that great Son of Encouragement, would later do the same upon Paul's return to a suspecting church in Jerusalem (9:27).

Paul would learn from and appreciate the risk the fledgling church took in bringing one of its premier enemies into its midst, and he would attribute the motivation and strength in doing so as having come directly from God's love in Christ. "The love of Christ urges us on," he would later write to the Corinthians.

Because “Christ died for all . . . we regard no one from a human point of view.” If anyone is in Christ, he instructs the Corinthians, there is a whole new creation . . . everything has become new!” As Paul well knew, old enemies become brothers and sisters; and “all of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5.13-18).

If we live from our identity in Christ, the task of reconciliation is at the heart of who we are and what we do. Wrestling with the social dimensions of reconciliation, Miroslav Volf relates the troubling story of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 when 800,000 people were slaughtered by their neighbors. A Rwandan Roman Catholic bishop voiced the sad observation, “Those who filled the churches on Sunday were the first to go out with machetes in their hands.” “Why?” Volf asked. In a country where 8 out of 10 people identify themselves as Christians, how could this be? Buoyed by an East African revival in the 1930's and having experienced an outbreak of the Holy Spirit across the land in the 1970's, these people were more than nominal Christians. How could they engage in such brutality?

Studies of the reaction of churches in a number of countries torn by ethnic strife reveal, Volf suggests, the same hostilities existing within churches as those existing in the broader culture. Rather than challenging the hostilities in which culture is immersed, churches become legitimators of the conflict, going so far as to invest the hostility with theological grounding. Claiming ultimate allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ, many Christians, many churches

in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective culture, ethnic group, or nation. In conflict situations, they tend to fight on the side of their group and are tempted to employ faith as a weapon in the struggle *[Interpretation, April 2000]*.

Despite our tendency in the church to make reconciliation simply about what God has done in Christ, the full meaning of reconciliation spills over into our relationship with others both inside and outside of the church. Having encountered God in Christ, we look upon others and our relationship with others through the lens of God's wide, inclusive love. Those we have branded as enemy become potential brothers and sisters. Those who have inflicted pain can be met with surprising forgiveness and welcome.

“We are an imperfect people in an imperfect world,” we firmly acknowledge in our Grace Covenant. “We have come together, not in absolute knowledge or possession of truth, but as pilgrims assisting one another in the journey toward the promise of God.” We are on a journey toward truth, but readily acknowledge we do not possess all truth. Our journey alongside one another, our encounter of new people, new situations, new needs in our world challenge us now and always toward change and growth.

Very early in our time together, we came across a phrase that speaks to a central aspect of our identity as a people of God. We are “an unfinished people of faith.” We are a people of faith—yes. But the very vastness of the God whom we worship in Christ and the wideness of the world in which God has placed us and to which God calls us means that we are now and we are always a people on the Way—a people who have not yet arrived.

Such a people have the insight and strength to become a community of reconciliation. Such a people, knowing themselves forgiven, extend grace and forgiveness to the world in which they live.