

Readings:

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24;

Psalms 30: 1-13;

2nd Corinthians 8:7-15;

Mark 5: 21-43

Christ is made the sure foundation

If there were any doubt about the value and vitality of what it means to have and be church, recent events have dispelled that doubt. After the church barbeque gathering Friday night here at St. James, I viewed a video recording of the eulogy given at the service for Reverend Clementa Pinckney, pastor of the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. All the world now knows that the President of our United States, himself a mixed race child of a black father—an African—and a white woman—an American, delivered the eulogy for the pastor and state senator who was murdered along with eight other persons. They were engaged in bible study on a Wednesday night—in the basement assembly room of their church.

Bible study. Church basement. AME Church.

This is church language--words not actually part of many person's lexicon in our world. I was struck deeply by the fact that the vital nature of church was made manifest not only during the President's memorable eulogy but also in the daily reporting done about the people who call their church lovingly, "Mother Emanuel." There is no doubt that this community in Charleston, South Carolina loves its church and understands its centrality in their lives, not only for worship, but also for learning and for serving their community. *The power of church is not to be underestimated!* That was the message that underscored, at least for me, every part and parcel of what we saw and heard about the pastor and people of that great historic church.

Why is the power of church not to be underestimated? Perhaps the title of the hymn we began our own worship singing today says it best: ***Christ is made the sure foundation***

The basis for church is unique: it is all about assembling together, as a community, to further the word and example of Jesus the

Christ and to worship the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The lyrics

Allow me to read the lyrics of the hymn, sung to the tune known as *Westminster Abbey*, to remind us about the spiritual foundation of the AME Church in Charleston, of our church here in La Jolla, and all churches across the globe:

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone; chosen of the Lord and precious, binding all the church in one: holy Zion's help forever, and her confidence alone. To this temple, where we call thee, come, O lord of Hosts, today! With thy faithful loving-kindness hear thy people as they pray, and thy fullest benediction shed within its walls alway. Here vouchsafe to all thy servants what they ask of thee to gain; what they gain from thee forever with the blessed to retain, and hereafter in thy glory evermore with thee to reign. Laud and honor to the Father, laud and honor to the Son, laud and honor to the Spirit, ever three and ever one; one in might and one in glory, while unending ages run.

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There were times when one could assume that most people knew something about churches—what they stand for in terms of worship, community and engagement with the larger community. This is no longer true. It has been one of the shocks to my system as I have witnessed this reality develop over time. Now I know as I meet with people—in and out of the church—that I can assume nothing in terms of knowledge or experience of the church. That is why the focus on a vibrant church in our own day is so powerful, even in the midst of a horrible hate crime. When the message of forgiveness uttered by the families and members of the church soared above the actions of violence and hatred shown by the killer, I felt pride in being their sister in Christ. Surely each of you shares this not only with me but with all those who were moved deeply by the multi-layered tragedy. The power of Christ's teaching about forgiveness, so deeply absorbed by those Christians in Charleston, is indeed made manifest to a world desperate for its balm.

The Presidential eulogy

The phenomena of a U.S. President delivering a Christian eulogy to not only the 6000 in attendance, but to a world-wide audience is significant in itself. The name of the church, Emanuel, means “God with us,” and oh how much that name symbolizes! The members of Emanuel Church today are tied in history and memory to a past steeped in both joy and sorrow. Joy-- from the shared faith of those who formed it in 1791, a coalition of free blacks as well as slaves. They were then members of Charleston’s Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1816, they left their white counterparts in a dispute over burial grounds. Then they came under the banner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Hence, the AME Church. That joy was complicated by state legislation which prohibited slaves and free blacks from gathering without white supervision. That was part of the sorrow. That is the sort of thing we simply cannot imagine in our own day.

Church members continued to worship together despite the law; however, in 1822 the church was burned to the ground when an alleged slave revolt was exposed. What a painful and sorrowful part of their history that was. With faith in God, they rebuilt and drew strength from their adversity. In 1886, during the reconstruction period, Mother Emanuel was destroyed in an earthquake. Once again, the people of God, the people with faith to move mountains, rebuilt again.

Emanuel African Methodist Church has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1985, with its Gothic Revival style structure, signature steeple and gorgeous stain glass windows. Martin Luther King, Jr., among other civil right leaders, made it a destination stop to encourage the enactment of Civil Rights legislation in the 1960’s.

Sue Monk Kidd

Ironically, many weeks before the recent shooting rampage occurred, I eagerly read Sue Monk Kidd’s riveting new book entitled, *The Invention of Wings*, a work of historical fiction centered in the life and times of early nineteenth century Charleston. Monk’s work is inspired in part by the historic figure of Sarah

Moore Grimke, the brave American abolitionist, writer and member of the women’s suffrage movement. Prior to reading Sue Monk Kidd’s book, I had not realized that Sarah Grimke was from a leading Charleston family. She and her sister, Angelina, made history through their efforts toward racial equality. You can be assured that they were *persona non grata* in Charleston and had to make their home in the north. Although a work of fiction, Kidd’s work offers a valuable insight into the time in which Emanuel AME Church was struggling to exist. When people were living in fear of one another. When the world was upside down in confusion. When people needed God with them more than ever—both whites and blacks. When the original sin of our country was exhibiting its ugly head.

All of this was in the background of my mind as I listened intently to President Obama’s historic eulogy. My own family history of ancestors from South Carolina is also part of the background in my mind and heart. The issues which are now punctuated by the murder of nine innocent persons studying the Bible in their own church—the issue of the confederate flag for example—are all part of a most complicated mosaic, not only of history but also of institutional sin. These moral issues are critical to identify, as a nation and as adherents of the Christian faith. As disciples of Jesus.

President Obama did just that in his eulogy. He named the realities about race in our country which continue to challenge us. He suggested that God works in mysterious ways, meaning that this act of hatred was met with Christian forgiveness and human compassion. People of every color have come together to say “no” to this kind of hate crime and “yes” to treating everyone with dignity and respect. The hate crime backfired, but the lives of those fine nine men and women are now forever absent from the families and friends who loved them so.

Miracles, faith and grace

Grace prevailed and God is truly with the people of Mother Emanuel. There is as much a miracle in that place today as there is in the stories we heard today in the Gospel of Mark. There may not be a hemorrhaging woman or a

12 year old girl saved by Jesus, but there is the miracle of faith playing out for all the world to witness. This is the power of faith in things seen and unseen. There is never a miracle without faith. Not in the case of Jarius' daughter, the hemorrhaging woman, or the people of Mother Emanuel. God's grace is intertwined with the faith of human beings, allowing miracles to really happen.

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As President Obama said about the perpetrator of hate at Mother Emanuel: "Blinded by hatred, [the killer] failed to comprehend what Reverend Pinckney so well understood--the power of God's grace." He reminded us that grace is not anything we earn or merit, but is a spiritual gift bestowed by God upon us. We receive it with gratitude and pray that we may make the best use of the gift given. Our eyes need to be open wide about the whole wide world. When injustice prevails, we can call upon the great gift of grace we receive from God and take action where needed.

Why? Because we are a people of faith. We are the church. We are God's agents in the world. That is our calling. Nothing less. I believe the pastor of Mother Emanuel embraced this theology deeply. I hope and pray that we will all learn from his example and not be afraid to keep our eyes open and shut out the blindness which so often obscures our path toward justice in our society. By doing so, we will receive grace upon grace and be rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!

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Now I ask that we join in singing the hymn composed by John Newton, a man who engaged in the slave trade but experienced a conversion on the sea, where he had his "great deliverance." When all seemed lost in a violent storm, Newton called out, "Lord, have mercy upon us." He lived to do much good with the gifts of grace granted him, including his campaign for the abolition of slavery. Infidel and libertine turned ordained minister in the Church of England, Newton was secure in his faith that amazing grace would lead him home. Just as it does for you and me. As we sing, I pray we sing in solidarity with those of Emanuel

African Methodist Episcopal Church, as they sang with President Obama at the conclusion of his eulogy of Reverend Clementa Pinckney.

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Hymn number 519 *Amazing Grace...Verses 1-3.*

1 Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

2 'Twas grace first taught my heart to fear
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

3 The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

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