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St Patrick's Episcopal Church  
Long Beach, MS  
Proper 7B

On Wednesday night 9 Christians in Charleston South Carolina gathered at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church for Bible Study. They came together to share the word of God and their experience of Christ through scripture. They gathered as a family of believers, as Christ had taught them - to grow in faith and understanding through examining the living text of the Bible. They gathered to share their life in Christ and together they died, each shot, at the hands of Dylann Roof, a 21 year old South Carolinian who targeted them because of the church they attended and because of the color of their skin.

This morning, there are a lot of things I would rather be talking about than this attack. Many of you would probably rather be talking about something else as well. We've been inundated with the news of this tragedy since Thursday...washed over again and again by the stark details of what we know from the news media right on down to our news feed on facebook. I'd like to pretend that there is something else to talk about today...but the truth is, I don't think there is anything more important than this topic.

9 Christians died on Thursday in a country that champions the fundamental right of all people to live freely. And yet, again and again, we are seeing that not all Americans live equally in this country. Not everyone in this country gets to live as freely as you or I, not everyone can feel as safe or protected as you or I, not everyone gets the same advantages or support as you or I. We as a nation want so much for ourselves and yet we are so unwilling to do the hard work necessary to really make this a land that is for all people. We'd rather not talk about it - we would rather not put into words that we are a nation still deeply segregated by race - we are a nation that is still deeply divided along racial lines. Those brothers and sisters in Christ who died on Thursday night died because they were black. They died because of the color of their skin - and too many of us want to pass the whole thing off as the savage act of a deranged young man...and maybe we could accept that reality, for just a while, if it didn't keep happening, over and over again - not just the mass murders that happen so frequently in this country that it's easy to become callously unaffected by them, but also the continued evidence that black citizens are treated unfairly and unjustly because of the color of their skin. These acts of violence and injustice are becoming so common that they are starting to define who we are as a nation.

Brothers and sisters, we are just that - a family...and our family is not defined by this church. All of us, black, white, straight, gay, liberal, conservative - all of us are beloved children of God, all of us are part of the one family made through God. I can never say it enough - but it is you and I who are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. And those hands and feet - they are not meant to be violent - they are not meant to act with prejudice or through a lens of racism. Those hands and feet are meant to bring the loving and healing words and actions of Christ to a broken and battered world.

And yet, you already know that. I have preached that message to you again and again. What I want to speak to as being the hands and feet of Christ in the world today is about holding each other accountable. Loving each other enough to have the hard

conversations - to call each other out when we speak out of fear or arrogance or ignorance or hate - instead of love.

Because that is where we will begin to find some redemption in the wake of Charleston...that is how we can redeem the senseless loss of life that happened on Wednesday. We can begin to talk about how we don't always act in love - how we don't always speak in love - how we take advantage of systems that lift up some while holding back others - how we look for excuses to condemn the behavior of others without a thought as to what it might be like to walk in their shoes. We can admit that all people in this country do not have the same opportunities as we do. We can accept that and then work to change it. Because each and everyone of us in this room today, who has been baptized in the Episcopal Church has committed themselves to changing the injustices that led to the loss of 9 lives in Charleston. Each one of us has committed ourselves to a life that lifts up instead of tears down. We have committed ourselves not only to seeking and serving Christ in every person we meet, but to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting every person's dignity. But lest I be too quick to gloss over the vow that stands out most starkly this morning - in baptism we also commit ourselves to persevere in resisting evil and whenever we sin to repent and return to the Lord. Racism, sexism, classism - they are all evils - they all tear down the kingdom of God instead of lift it up and each one demands that we seek repentance.

This is the tough work of being in a Christian community. These are hard words to digest- they are hard words for me to say. But, they need to be spoken. We need to hold each other accountable and love each other through it. We have so much to offer this country through our witness to Christ. We have so much to offer our communities - through our love and grace, through our commitment to justice and care of neighbor. Each and everyone of us can be a witness to love and grace, compassion and understanding - but we have to commit to it - we have to accept that being a follower of Christ is hard work and it demands, not only that we wrestle with our sins, but that we give our best self to doing the work of God in the world.

Right now, as we face the death of our brothers and sisters in Christ, in South Carolina, its easy to think that hatred has won. Its easy to believe that nothing we do or say is going to eradicate the evil that causes attacks like these. But as big as hatred seems in this moment, the love of God is always bigger. God is bigger than the hate. Love can be the last chapter of this story - it can be the last chapter - but for love to win, we have to make changes - we have to stop tolerating the culture of hate and bigotry - stop tolerating systems that tear down and treat people as unequal - stop pretending that issues of race are imbedded only in our past. For love to win we have to find our voices, find the words that Christ would have us say. Then, and only then will love have a chance to win.