

“Beatitudes: The Poor and Those Who Mourn”

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In Charleston, South Carolina, there was a mass shooting that took place at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in the downtown area. The event took place on an evening of June 17, 2015. It was during a prayer service that nine people were killed by the gunman, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist. Three other victims survived. The church was 201 years old. Imagine that. They [the church has] played an important role throughout history: protecting slaves during that era, through the Civil Rights movement, and now in the Black Lives Matter movement of the 2010s.

The church’s Senior Pastor Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney held rallies for the shooting of Walter Scott (just six weeks or so before) by a white police officer. So much was going on. Not only was Rev. Pinckney the pastor of Emanuel Church, he was also a State Senator. He was pushing for legislation so that all police officers could have body cameras. Several noted that what happened on that night of June 17, 2015, was very similar to what happened to an African-American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where the Ku Klux Klan killed four girls - four young black girls - and injured 14 others; an attack that galvanized the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement.

Thirteen people, including the shooter, participated in that Bible study. On that night, 12 individuals gathered in that church to do what many of us have done over and over again. They sat down and opened with prayer. They opened their Bibles and started talking about what the Bible meant to them.

All of a sudden, these 12 African-American people sitting around this table were greeted by a young white gentleman who walked in the door. He seemed pleasant enough. He sat down and asked if he could join them. Then he asked, “Where is Rev. Pinckney?” Rev. Pinckney raised his hand and he [the young man] pulled up a chair so that he was sitting right next to Rev. Pinckney. They started talking about the Bible, and at first everything was alright. But pretty soon this young white guy started arguing with them about the Bible and it got kind of difficult, so they tried to end it a little early, because it was uncomfortable. So, as they all started to close with prayer, Dylann stood up. He pulled out a gun and he started hollering at the 87-year-old woman across from him. He started screaming, “I have to do this. You raped our women and you are taking over our country and you have to go.”

They tried to talk him [Dylann] out of it and when a young man, 26-year-old Tywanza Sanders, knew that the gun was still pointed at his 87-year-old aunt, that 26-year-old young man dove in front of his aunt and was the first shot. Dylann reportedly continued to holler “Y’all wants something to pray about? I will give you something to pray about,” as he shot the others around the table. Three survived. One of them being Sanders, the 26-year-old’s mother, and his 5-year-old niece. They laid down and pretended they had already been shot.

The story, like so many others like it, grieves us. They cause us to mourn. I think especially because we feel so vulnerable in a church. Those who survived - their families and their church families and our entire nation - because of that event, know what it is like to feel

poor in spirit - to know that this can happen in our country [and] in a church, diminishes [us] and makes us all feel somehow less. We know what it is like to grieve and to mourn. We did it, in this particular circumstance, the following morning when most of us got out of bed and we heard it on TV on June 18, 2015. We know what it is like to mourn in so many other ways. We mourn with the deaths of our own family members. We struggle with how to move forward.

Right from the start Jesus turned the world upside down with his birth and now with his teaching - teaching that the poor shall inherit the Kingdom of the God; that those who mourn will be blessed.

How in the world can Jesus say those things when we feel so uncomfortable, when we are in those moments when we are feeling poor in spirit, when we are going through those moments of utter depth of mourning? How can Jesus say that? And yet, that is what we are left with. We feel powerless. We feel empty. But what Jesus was getting at is, that in those moments when we are so utterly lost, that we are truly dependent on God; and God calls us to the Holy Spirit, speaks to our hearts and our minds and helps us.

When everything is going well in our lives we don't need God. We can do it ourselves. But, when we are utterly in despair, when we feel totally worthless and incapable, it's in those moments when [if] we feel any hope, we feel the Spirit of God. When [if] we feel any opportunity to get out of the pit we are left in, we feel the Spirit of God. How utterly lost those survivors must have felt - and their family members - as they rushed to the church, as the phone calls came in, knowing that their loved ones were there, and other loved ones. Were they there that night? Or, did they go grocery shopping or do something else? Everybody [was] running to their church home to find out who was there and who was gone; who they needed to mourn.

I can't imagine. But what lifted them out of that poorness of Spirit, in their mourning, was the amazing way in which, to a person, every member of that church - including its leadership - responded. To a person, they talked about forgiving the one - the shooter. They talked about healing their community. They talked about rallying around each other and rallying around their community, and showing a Christ-like love in the midst of the greatest sorrow and loss they thought they would *never* have to face. It was in their poorness of Spirit and in their mourning that they spoke to the rest of the world.

You and I could preach until we are blue in the face and they [church attendees] will say, "Well, isn't that nice;" or, "He had a funny sermon today;" or, "It was a nice sermon;" or, "I didn't really agree with it;" or, "I wish he would shut up about that;" when everything is going well. But when you show your pain, your misery, your poorness of Spirit, your mourning to the world and you still have the faith to forgive - to show compassion, empathy, mercy and grace - you have done something.

You haven't just spoken words, you have offered the true example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It's in those moments - and only those - that people will actually listen. When everything is going great they don't have to listen to you, you've got the world by the tail. But, when nine brothers and sisters were shot and three others traumatized, and you are *expected* to lash out in anger, and you are *expected* to be bitter, and to hate, and you don't - that is when the world stands up and listens.

That might have been one of the greatest moments of the decade for the Christian faith, because they had to live it and do - not what their minds and their hearts initially *wanted* to do - but what God told them what they needed to do. They didn't let their survival instinct, their anger issues, or anything else get in the way. They spoke with God's voice. They spoke with the Beatitudes and God's blessing even for those who hated, even for that one who killed.

So when you are in a moment that is desperately frustrating - horribly painful - know that people are watching - sometimes it is your family, your children, your parents, or grandparents. You are being watched more so when it hurts. When you can show faith in God at that moment, you are giving a sermon that is better than 99 of mine - just by not giving up - simply by expressing your faith when it would be easy not to. It is easy for me to get up here and preach. I have been doing it for 30 some years. I have been educated to do it, but it is not nearly as effective as when you do it, especially when it hurts. I don't ever want to imply that God brings pain upon your heart. I don't think God forces a gunman into a room and shoots people so the message can be found. But I think there are moments when the evil of this world happens and God helps you respond, God takes that bad situation and uses it as a teachable moment of faith.

All of the weeks you have been to church, all of the times you have been in your Bible study safely, all of the moments in which you prayed before you went to bed with your children, and then went to your own bed and prayed yourself, was preparation for the dark night of your soul - preparing you for when you were so poor in the Spirit you didn't think you could move forward, praying for that moment when you lost someone that was your entire life and now you are so lost you don't know what to do or where to go. You can still cry out to God because you have laid that foundation in the Holy Spirit. It has been laid upon you and when you don't want to move forward, and you do, you have just blessed everyone around you with the Spirit of the living God. That is how the importance of the Spirit in mourning and in pain can be a blessing, now and always. Amen.