

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2015

Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Let us pray... Amen.

Sometimes, great windstorms arise in our lives, so that it feels like we're going to be swamped. Waves and wind toss us about, and it seems like all we can do is hold on for dear life.

Like the disciples in the boat with Jesus, we have to wonder, doesn't Jesus care that we're being tossed about by the elements? Is he really sleeping through these harrowing and terrifying moments?

It's hard to have any real perspective when these storms pop up. We aren't prepared for them, we feel ill-equipped to manage them, and often we forget to ask Jesus to calm the storm. We think that it's our job to triumph over the storms on our own.

A health crisis, the passing of a loved one, a tragic hate crime committed in an historic church in Charleston South Carolina, the winds can be overpowering. It's not that Jesus doesn't care, it's that we often ask for his help when it's almost too late! When the boat is about to capsize, when we finally are ready to admit we need help, *then* we ask for help.

Jesus calms the most frenzied storms. At Emanuel A.M.E. Church, a great windstorm arose out of nowhere, and tossed their little boat until 9 children of God were dead. And shortly thereafter, a gathering of the victim's loved ones presented themselves to the public to say definitively, *we forgive the one who did this*. Jesus had calmed the storm, and said, 'Peace, be still'. And in the stillness, those who had lost their loved ones were united in the strength of their faith, so much so, that they could forgive the one who had taken the lives of those closest to them. Forgiveness in the face of such evil. The power of that faith puts me in great awe, just like the disciples were in great awe over the stillness that Jesus imposed upon the great windstorm.

Politicians and civic leaders will share their opinions on how we might prevent these storms from arising again, but great windstorms come, no matter how much we try and prevent them. I'm not suggesting that the storms should somehow be acceptable to us, but I am suggesting that there is very little we can do to prevent them. Our

most powerful response in the face of these storms is to ask Jesus to intervene, to calm the winds and the waves, and help us act on our faith, and not out of fear.

Which is exactly what the families from Emanuel A.M.E. Church did the other day. They acted on their faith, and not out of fear. They asked Jesus to calm the storm, and he did. They found comfort in the calmness, they found strength in their unity, they found courage in spite of the evil that took their loved ones.

We can't prepare for a storm like that. We can't say that if someone were to come to our door, and ask to join one of our Faith Formation groups, and were to unleash such an evil torrent of hate that lives were lost, that any of us could stand before the world and confidently forgive the one who brought the storm.

Everything we've learned from Jesus, and the bible, tells us what we must do in the face of such a tragedy, but until we're actually in the boat being tossed about, we won't know what we will do.

But we have the example of the faithful children of God from Charleston, S.C. to guide us. We have the example of countless Amish communities that have suffered at the hands violent perpetrators, and were unified in their faithful response of forgiveness. We have examples from all over the world, where the loved ones of those who lost their lives rose from the calm after the storm to offer forgiveness as their first and best response in the face of evil.

In the past, I may have added my voice to the chorus of those who demand a political or legislative response to storms like this. But honestly, I don't have the stomach for it right now. I see the injustice of how cases like these are handled based on the religion or race of the person who committed the crime, but I am in great awe of the communities that can rise above the political chaos and get to the heart of the matter: the health our very souls depend on the way we respond to these storms.

Of course, these storms don't just happen to Christians, they happen to atheists, agnostics, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists...they happen to everyone. But it seems to me that the impulse to forgive comes from those who have a foundation of

faith informing their life choices. I want my faith to be that strong. I want my faith to give me that kind of courage. I want my faith to strong enough that I can ask Jesus to calm the storm, to bring about Peace and stillness in the midst of wind and waves. I want my faith to be strong enough that I can forgive in the face of such evil. But I *don't* want to have my faith tested in that way! I would be perfectly happy never having to face that test....

We experience the sudden and violent storms of our lives, but we can only dimly imagine what the people of Emanuel A.M.E Church are going through right now. But we have their shining example of what to do when facing such and impossible evil. And we have the promises of our Lord and Savior to console us.

We don't get to choose whether storms like these arise, but we *do* get to choose our response to such storms. I'm in great awe when I see people like those from Emanuel A.M.E. choose forgiveness. God bless them. And God bless us. Amen.