

**In Light of the Attack on Mother Emmanuel AME Church  
What Now  
June 21, 2015**

**Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.  
Providence Baptist Church**

Today is the Summer Solstice, the official beginning of summer. Today the tilt of the earth toward the sun reaches it's zenith, 23 degrees, 26 minutes. It is the longest day of the year, the day when we have the maximum amount of sunlight in the Northern Hemisphere.

Today is the beginning of summer, no matter what the school calendar, or the thermometer says. Today we are officially in summer—the time of the year when the heat and humidity drape over our bodies, causing us to seek shade and air conditioning.

But the reality is that since Wednesday it has felt more like the depths of winter. Our souls have been covered with a darkness deeper than the darkest night. We have felt the cold breath of the angel of death blowing down Calhoun Street. Our grief clings to us as if it will never let us go.

As I have sought words of scripture this week the only ones that keep coming to mind are those words from the prophet Jeremiah. *"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping; Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more."*<sup>1</sup>

Once again our region, our city has become home base for the national media as they have come to cover the most recent incident of homegrown terrorism. Even after these days, even after watching the reports, after attending the vigils, after seeing the memorials placed outside the church, after reading the biographies of those who died, even now it is hard to imagine what happened inside that church. Not since the deaths of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church has there been such a racist attack on a church.

The thought of it is so horrible. And for it to happen here, in the Holy City, in our city....

What do we do with this? What do we do with our city, with our neighbors, with our feelings?

That has been our struggle thing week, hasn't it? What do we do with all these feelings? What do we do with the anger, the sorrow, the disbelief? How do we come to church? How do we live after this week?

I want to suggest that we begin by recognizing the fact that we have suffered a great loss. We have lost individuals. And we need to remember them, know their names, call their names:.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:15

***Rev. Clementa Pinckney,  
Tywanza Sanders,  
Cynthia Hurd,  
Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton,  
Myra Thompson,  
Ethel Lance,  
Rev. Daniel Simmons,  
Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor  
Susie Jackson***

These were the victims, those who were killed.

But we were all attacked. We have all suffered a loss. We have lost the naiveté that such a thing can't/won't happen here. We have lost the idea that racism is on the wane. We have lost the belief, the hope that church is a sanctuary, a place of safety.

Our city, our dreams, our beliefs have been attacked, and we are grieving! We are grieving—and we need to recognize that fact. We need to recognize that in our own way we will be going through the stages of grief.

We are going to feel the shock. When those first reports came there was that sense that we had heard something wrong. Things like this don't happen, at least they don't happen here!

There was the sense of denial—I must have heard something wrong. The media often mistakes Charleston for Charlotte. Maybe they meant Charleston, WV. It can't be here because I just drove by. I was just on Calhoun Street.

There was that sense of bargaining, of prayer. Dear God, please help this be wrong! Please let them all be alright! God, don't let this be true! God NO!

There is the anger that emerges. It is directed at God—what good are you God if you allow something like this to happen in church? It is directed at other who don't share your opinion, your hurt, your viewpoint. It is directed at those who are capitalizing on the story, spinning it in a way that makes them look good, that makes us look bad. It is directed at...or maybe not directed at all. It is just anger, rage at the unfairness of it all! Life isn't supposed to be like this! You aren't supposed to be killed at a Bible Study!

At some point, hopefully there is acceptance...but to be honest, it is too soon! And I pray that we will never arrive at the point that this kind of tragedy is acceptable!

We are grieving. We will be traveling this journey in the days ahead—as individuals, as a community. It will not be smooth. It will move in fits and starts. And we will not move in synch. Some will be ahead, others will lag behind. Some will get stuck in some stages—maybe denial that this is not that big of a deal; others in anger.

Understand this is a process. Give some grace and understanding, to yourself, to others—especially when you hear someone say something that seems so ridiculous—like Rev. Pinckney brought this on since he did not arm his congregation. There are times when such statements are a last grasp at sanity, a desperate attempt to make sense of the

senseless. It may be just stupidity, but it may be someone struggling with the grief of a reality, a dream that has been killed.

Know that you are not alone. Know that we are not alone! I have been overwhelmed with the response to this tragedy. It has come from literally around the world. I have personally received emails, Facebook messages, text from New Zealand, Bali, South Africa, Switzerland and England—individuals who have reached out to say that they are praying for our city.

At times it has been almost more than my heart could bear. Thursday morning as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship began their morning session at the General Assembly in Dallas time was taken to pray for Charleston. Friday afternoon I received a call from Rabbi Sarit Horowitz from New York City who has come to Charleston with a group of students just to be with us, to be present, to give hugs, to let us know we are not alone.

For me, the most meaningful has come from Andrew Henton-Pussey. Andrew is the pastor of Walworth Road Baptist Church in Hitchin, England. We met during a sabbatical in Prague and have become friends. We visited his family when we were in England; Andrew and his family worshipped with us last year when they came to the states.

Thursday morning he sent me this email:

*Amongst the events of our weekend, we have our annual In Love and Remembrance service, an opportunity to which we invite those who have lost loved ones, and where we read out a list of names (currently around 80 for this year), lighting a candle for each one. We will also be lighting a candle that has accompanied us in our worship on a number of Sundays this year.*

*It was first used in January, as the discovery was made that among the passengers of the Air Asia flight (from Indonesia to Singapore) that crashed at the end of the year were a number of people (40+) from a single congregation in Surabaya, followed shortly by the discovery that in fact 73 people on that flight were members from just two Christian churches in that community.*

*Recognising the bonds that are ours in Christ, we have added others to what has become a symbol of fellowship and solidarity, including those Christian brothers and sisters who were present in services of worship in Kathmandu and elsewhere in Nepal when the first major earthquake struck at the end of April, and whose church buildings collapsed around and upon them.*

*It is humbling now to add the nine members of Emmanuel AME, Charleston, and all those who have been caught up in this horrific experience, to this simple and yet significant gesture of faith and hope, offered in trust and in fellowship.*

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, who stand with us, even as we stand with the members of Mother Emmanuel.

It is in that spirit that I invite you to join me in another litany, one that Richard Gee sent and was so good. It will be on the wall. Will you join me:

*[Leader]*

*We stand before you today, oh Lord  
Hearts broken, eyes weeping, heads spinning  
Our brothers and sisters have died  
They gathered and prayed and then were no more  
The prayer soaked walls of the church are spattered with blood  
The enemy at the table turned on them in violence  
While they were turning to you in prayer*

*[All]*

*We stand with our sisters  
We stand with our brothers  
We stand with their families  
We stand to bear their burden in Jesus' name*

*[Leader]*

*We cry out to you, oh Lord  
Our hearts breaking, eyes weeping, heads spinning  
The violence in our streets has come into your house  
The hatred in our cities has crept into your sanctuary  
The brokenness in our lives has broken into your temple  
The dividing wall of hostility has crushed our brothers and sisters  
We cry out to you, May your Kingdom come, may it be on earth as it is in heaven*

*[All]*

*We cry out for our sisters  
We cry out for our brothers  
We cry out for their families  
We cry out for peace in Jesus' name*

*[Leader]*

*We pray to you today, oh Lord  
Our hearts breaking, eyes weeping, souls stirring  
We pray for our enemies, we pray for those who persecute us  
We pray to the God of all Comfort to comfort our brothers and sisters in their  
mourning  
We pray that you would bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes  
We pray that you would give them the oil of joy instead of mourning  
We pray that you would give them a garment of praise in place of a spirit of despair*

*[  
All]*

*We pray for our sisters  
We pray for our brothers  
We pray for their families  
We pray for their comfort in Jesus' name*

*[Leader]*

*We declare together, oh Lord*

*With hearts breaking, eyes weeping and souls stirring*

*We will continue to stand and cry and weep with our brothers and sisters*

*We will continue to make a place of peace for even the enemies at our table*

*We will continue to open our doors and our hearts to those who enter them*

*We will continue to seek to forgive as we have been forgiven*

*We will continue to love in Jesus' name because you taught us that love conquers all*

*[All]*

*We declare our love for you, our Sisters*

*We declare our love for you, our Brothers*

*We declare our love for you, their families*

*We declare our love as one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism*

*We declare they do not grieve alone today<sup>2</sup>*

We are not alone. The members and families of Mother Emmanuel are not alone. We stand together. In worship; in vigils, in prayer, in the ringing of bells. Tonight there are over 6,000 people who have signed up to bridge the bridge. At 8:00 tonight there is a prayer vigil in Smythe Park. We will gather to pray, to grieve, to be together.

And that is so important.

But if it ends there...

And that is the danger—that it will end there and nothing will change.

That was the fear spoken by the prophet of our age Jon Stewart on Thursday night when he feared that the names of the martyrs of Mother Emmanuel would join the names of Columbine, of Virginia Tech, of Aurora, of Newtown. After each of those tragedies our nation swore, "Never Again."

Never Again....until the next time!

At what point will we say, there will be no next time! When will we say that we know what to do to stop this, and now, now we will garner up the will to make it happen?

We have to address our gun culture. And I know for many of you the very words cause the hairs on your neck to rise! I am not asking, nor do I expect us to get rid of our guns. They are too ingrained in our culture.

But can we move beyond our political fear of a cult who for too long has held our nation hostage, valuing guns over children, weapons over life? Can we not bring about rational regulation?

Do hunters really need an automatic weapon designed to bring about maximum carnage and death in war to wage with deer? This past year a bill to address the rampant

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.onechurchliturgy.com/>

domestic violence in our state nearly failed because there were those who didn't want to see convicted abusers lose their right to carry a gun! Where are our values? Where are our priorities?

We have to deal with our guns. But even more, we have to address the great unresolved American sin—that of our racism. It might have been pride that chased Adam and Eve from the garden, but it our racism that continues to drive us away from Eden. And we have refused to confess this sin. We still have not dealt with the fact that many in our country did not arrive here voluntarily, but shackled in the bowels of ships, sold as chattel to build our city, to build our nation. We have not dealt with our ancestral fear and guilt, our privilege, our discrimination.

This is not a southern monopoly, but on the grounds of our statehouse flies the swatiska of our land. And while the American flag and the SC flag were lowered to half staff in memory of the horror of this week, the Confederate flag remained high. It may have once been a sign of heritage, but it has come to symbolize the deepest evils of our souls, and it is time for it to be removed!

But it is not enough for us to deal with racism as a public issue while neglecting our own inner sin. And it comes in ways that we don't realize.

Wednesday night Anita and I had a wonderful evening with her WV brother and family at the Joe as the Riverdogs took on the WV Power. We won! As we left we discovered that due to the road construction you are rerouted as you come to Mt. Pleasant. The detour takes you down Line Street.

As we made our way through that neighborhood I commented aloud about the danger we were in, because of them. Them! I made that comment almost at the same time that someone who looks a lot like me was committing the most recent act of terrorism in our land.

See, this isn't just about Dylan Roof. It is about me. It is about us.

What do we do about that?

Can we confess our sin? Until we do, then holding hands won't do a thing. Until we do we cannot transform ourselves, our community, our world. We will just wait till the next time, and pray that it isn't here.

Today we gather for worship on the Summer Solstice. Officially it will occur at 12:38 this afternoon, not long after Allison Sawyer comes dripping out of the baptismal waters of the Wando River. It marks a new season—for nature, for Allison.

The question is, will this day mark a new season for us?

How much are we willing to change in order to care, to love, to heal, to live?

How far are we willing to go to transform our world into the kingdom of God?