

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost, proper 7. Mark 4:35-41. St. Augustine's in-the-woods Freeland
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Outside the birds are singing. It's been a beautiful run of weather, which is always - in my view - icing on the cake of living on this island! We are blessed.

Yet beyond the moat our increasingly complex world seems to be spiraling out of control. It feels as if we are in a storm-tossed boat. How easy to allow fear to conquer us, and to cry out for Jesus! Whole countries – Syria and Libya and Somalia come immediately to mind – lie in ruin. Yet truthfully that's just the tip of the iceberg. Oppressive, authoritarian regimes cow the mass masses into submission thorough violence and oppression. Anarchy is rampant.

And here at home, 9 innocent people are murdered.

Once again, we are peering into the abyss of naked violence. I found myself thinking of that poignant question posed by Bob Dylan in "Blowin' in the wind:" "how many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died?"

And yet the hand-wringing spin has already started: "long gunman, not representative of responsible gun owners, nothing we can do. Etc. Etc. " you've heard it all before. Pretty soon we'll have forgotten it – like the movie theater in Colorado. The only reason I remember it, and where it took place (Aurora) is because the trial just happened.

These two events, these "mass shootings," they're not criminal acts, they're acts of terror, **they are terrorist acts** – the heinous action at Mother Emmanuel AME was, in the words of one clergy person (the Rev. William Cornell Brooks, President and CEO of the South Carolina NAACP), "the "desecration of the soul of a country," this country, our country.

Last Wednesday, one commentator (John Stewart) offered contrasting examples of our nation's response to terrorist acts. To protect our nation from foreign terrorist acts, he said, we have - in the last decade, invaded 2 countries (that we know of), spent billions of dollars, and thousands of the lives of our young men and women – not to mention those maimed for life – we have tortured hundreds, maybe thousands; , and we have killed tens – perhaps hundreds – of thousands of innocent civilians; we have bugged, the phones, email, and pretty much everything else of of every American citizen, all in the name of protecting our nation from foreign terrorism.

And then we do to ourselves what we claim we are trying to prevent foreigners from doing on our soil. ISIS an dAl Queda must be laughing up their sleeves at us.

I wonder what would happen if we spent those billions and dedicate that many lives to solving the issues of systemic racism and violence in this country?

One of my Jewish friends reminded me on Friday of a passage in Leviticus (19:16) – in Hebrew, it's this: "lo ta'amod al dam re'eyecha" (Lev. 19:16) – "do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." It is, Leviticus is reminding us, a sacred obligation, not to be passive in the face of

violence to others. For harmony to exist between human beings requires that we not stand idly by in the face of violence to our neighbor – to our fellow human beings – just as our neighbors must not allow violence to be done to us.

Leviticus provides a further charge in the very next verse (19:17) “you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.” So here’s another sacred obligation: to be social critics when “we see that society, individuals, or even our government is making terrible mistakes;” (Rabbi Zari Weiss). The Hebrew in that verse is nuanced – in speaking out, it says, we must be cautious in avoiding any action that would also bring blame on ourselves. In other words, we must not commit violence in order to bring about an end to violence – which has actually been the *modus operandi* for nations, governments, and all sorts of entities and individuals from the beginning of human history.

In the face of that sort of violence our faith – and it’s founder, Jesus – offers us a gift; a gift that speaks to all fearful, grieving, and outraged hearts – not only those of the community at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina but throughout our nation. It’s the prayer that Jesus offered in another prayer room, to another group of fearful individuals: “Peace be with you.”

Those words weren’t the only message that Jesus conveyed in that moment in that upper room. His body spoke much more eloquently than any collection of words ever could. The wounds he bore, the ones the disciples could see and touch, named the reality of their lives: the woundedness of systemic oppression, racism, and, in the end, the physical violence that ended his life on the cross.

And yet he spoke of peace.

To find the Peace of Christ, we have to meld together our Jewish and our Christian traditions: As Hymn 661 reminds us, “The peace of God, it is no peace” – if all we mean by peace is the absence of strife and war, then that’s not the peace of God.

We will never understand the peace of God if that’s what we think it is. Only when we understand our sacred obligation to respond, to call to account and to responsibility, those who violate God’s creation – and act on that obligation – will we truly understand what the Peace of God is all about.

In writing to his seminary community, the President of the Pacific School of Religion at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, David Vásquez-Levy, said this: “As we pray for the community at Emanuel AME Church and for the many other communities scarred by the violence of racism and inequality, may our proclamation of peace be grounded in the courage to name the reasons for its absence [and to speak out]. [For t]o us, as to those early disciples, Jesus says [this:] “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.....”

May we hear and honor that charge, to be doers of the word and not only hearers of it; to be social critics when our society demands it; to speak **and** to act, for God. Amen.