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All Saints Episcopal Church

Frederick Buechner, a noted 20th century theologian and author, wrote in his 1993 book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, this piece of advice about Scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks."

There are some questions the Bible asks that speak powerfully to this advice: Am I my brother's keeper? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Who is my neighbor? How many loaves do you have? What are you looking for? Do you want to get well? And, What is truth?

Buechner adds, "When you hear the question that is your question, then you have already begun to hear much."

The Gospel reading for today is one that contains many questions. The setting is the Sea of Galilee - a body of water surrounded by hills that is almost 700 feet below sea level and prone to sudden, violent windstorms.

Jesus has spent a long day preaching to crowds of people on one side of the water, and he suggests to the disciples that they cross over to the other side. As they steer the boat through the water, Jesus curls up in the back of the boat with his head on a pillow and falls sound asleep.

All of a sudden, the wind picks up and the waves get incredibly large, and the boat seems on the verge of capsizing. The disciples who are veteran fishermen realize that even they will not be able to keep up with bailing the water out of the boat, because the storm is too powerful. In their rising panic and desperation, they wake Jesus up, bewilderment and accusation in their voices. "Teacher, don't you care that we are drowning?"

Don't you care?

Jesus wakes up. He rebukes the wind and makes the sea grow calm again. In the silence that follows he asks his even more bewildered disciples two questions, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Really? "Why are we afraid?" Are you kidding?

What's not to be afraid of when you might be about to drown, whether you're in a boat in the Sea of Galilee or a boat in the middle of Mobile Bay racing to Dauphin Island? What's not to be afraid of if flood waters are rising swiftly in your house and carrying your children away from your grasp? Why are we afraid when faced with earthquakes or hurricanes or tornadoes, tsunamis, droughts, catastrophic diseases or large-scale starvation? Or mass shootings? In a school. In a movie theater. In a church, for God's sake.

Why are we afraid when we are faced with broken marriages, financial uncertainty, depressed children, unfriendly neighbors or grinding jobs?

Because we're human. Because fear is a rational response to a frightening situation.

Duh.

This week, as you know, nine African Americans were massacred by a Caucasian man during Bible study at their church in Charleston, South Carolina. One of the places we should not have to be afraid is in a church. Churches have always been places of sanctuary for those who are looking for safety from a dangerous situation.

This week was different. On Wednesday night, the Emanuel AME Church was not a safe place. Men & women - grandfathers and grandmothers, moms and dads, sons and daughters - people with families and hopes and dreams - had come together to study and pray and to enjoy the fellowship of the community. It should have been a safe place.

Now - once again - it certainly seems that the killing of obviously innocent people is happening far too often - we are faced with questions that we would rather not face:

Why did this man do what he did?

He has said to his interrogators that he almost decided not to kill them since they were so nice to him. Why didn't he follow through with that feeling instead?

Why did he pick this particular church?

Is this a racist act or is he mentally ill? Is there a difference?

Does he deserve the forgiveness of his victims' families?

Should he face capital punishment if he is found guilty?

These and other questions are already making the rounds of TV pundits and print articles. Plenty of people have opinions about them. We may or may not know the answers to them in time.

But there are other questions.

What about the ready availability of guns across our society?

- A pastor that I feel certain FOX News found because of his opinion was lauded on their network for saying two things: first, he said that this massacre was not a result of racism, but as a result of the war on Christianity (please note that some of the Presidential hopefuls have said that as well); therefore, he said, pastors and men in churches should arm themselves in church in order to be able to 'defend themselves' when the haters come.
- An NRA spokesman said that it was the fault of the church's pastor that they were killed because he (the pastor - also a state legislator) had voted against a proposed bill to allow concealed-carry guns in church.
- When will those who vote, either in the hallowed halls of government or in the voting booths of cities and towns across the country, realize that the possibility of safety for our children - and our friends - is more important than being able to buy a gun the minute you want it, and being able to shoot hundreds of rounds of ammunition in an instant?

And what about racism? And white privilege? We know better than to say racism was abolished in 1964. We live in Alabama, after all - in the city where the last recorded lynching of a Black man took place in 1981.

We should know that white privilege is real, despite any individual efforts on our parts to make it not so. "Just as we don't know what a privilege it is to be able-bodied until we, or someone close to us, loses significant body function, we don't know what white privilege is until we, or someone close to us, experiences significant discrimination on the basis of their skin color."

(Bronwyn Lea, <http://bronlea.com/2015/06/18/a-letter-from-a-white-south-african-to-white-americans/>)

Please note that the color of the crayon labeled "Flesh" in a box of Crayola crayons, and the color of 'flesh-colored' bandaids is the same. One color. And it isn't brown.

The clergy of this diocese got an email from our Bishop-Elect on Friday concerning this tragedy. He encouraged us, among other things, to 'lift up your thoughts and hearts in prayer.'

I have to say that I am not clear yet what my thoughts are. I know I am not alone in saying that I am sad and horrified and angry...and...tired. Tired that this kind of thing seems to happen again and again and again, with no end in sight. Tired that we will probably only pay attention to this particular tragedy as long as it takes for 9 funerals to take place - and then we will return to 'business as usual'. Tired of corporate refusal to take responsibility for its part in institutional '-isms'. Tired of complacency. Tired of hatred. Tired of being sad. Tired of being horrified. Tired of being angry. Tired of being tired.

I had wanted to just preach a 'nice' sermon today about the Gospel lesson and not deal with anything that is swirling around in my mind and in the pit of my stomach. But I couldn't. As I was writing this sermon, the evening news came on with more about the hatred driving the man whose middle name is, appropriately, Storm. It will take a while for me - for all of us, I'm guessing - to process this.

So what can we do?

The Bishop-Elect wrote, "Pray and remember. Remember that we are people of the resurrection. Because of that, we are bound to our hope for God's vision of a new creation to prevail. The darkness still tries to break in, but the light of love shines."

And he says, "Finally, pray for change - and work for it! ...[the Gospel on Sunday] starts when Jesus says, 'Let's go over to the other side.' Let's not allow this event to go without a challenge. 'Let's go to the other side' and commit ourselves not to remain silent about the increasing mistrust among people in our society. Let's confess that we still have work to do towards racial reconciliation. Let's renew our promise to strive for justice and peace among all people. In the words of Paul, 'Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love.'"

May God's Peace and Hope be with us!

