

get in the boat

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St. Thomas' Church, Whitemarsh

[Proper 7](#), Year B, 2015

May the words I speak and the words you hear be God's alone. Amen.

"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38)

These are the words of Jesus' disciples: terrified, anxious, panicking because of the waves beating fiercely against the boat. The incident takes place early on in Jesus' ministry, and the disciples call Jesus "Teacher," not yet realizing that he is the Son of God. They cry out in their fear, completely taken aback that Jesus is not interfering when their lives are in danger.

Today we find ourselves also faced with a storm. The horrific killing of nine Christians at Mother Emmanuel AME Church last Wednesday night have us crying out to God, just like the disciples, "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

Every time we are faced with senseless death, we repeat this question to God. Following natural disasters, upon being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or after freak accidents: "God, do you not care that we are perishing?"

But today the storm that we face is a storm of our own making. And now it is our brothers and sisters of color who are crying out to the privileged—to you and to me—"Fellow Americans, fellow Christians, fellow children of God, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Too often we have responded to acts of violence with passive hopelessness. We are quick to quell protests, claiming that we seek peace, and protests are not the way to achieve it. But our mantra of "Peace! Be still!" only serves to stifle the voices of the people who are suffering. When we advocate for peace, what we are really advocating for is maintaining the status quo. Change makes us feel uncomfortable. We don't want to change, because the truth is, we benefit greatly from the way things are right now. But you and I have benefited far too long at the expense of our sisters and brothers of color.

Fifty two years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, and wrote a letter to white Southern clergy responding to their claim that it wasn't the right time for action. He lamented their lack of participation, saying "all too many [religious leaders] have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows" (MLK, Jr. in [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)). He grieved that white people of faith were choosing not to get involved, pointing out the blindness of their privilege "I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action" (ibid.).

The month after Dr. King wrote this letter, he [addressed a congregation](#) in mourning. The reason for their grieving? On September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded at 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing 4 young girls. Four white men, motivated by hatred due to their racist beliefs, took the lives of four innocent children as they sat in church learning about God. The bombing became a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, helping lead to the passing of the Civil Rights Act the following year.

What happened last week in Charleston is really not all that different from what happened at a different church in a different town 52 years ago. Just as a moment of tragedy was a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement back then, let us honor the lives of the 9 martyrs—Sharonda, Cynthia, Tywanza, Depayne, Susie, Ethel, Clementa, Daniel, and Myra— let us use this moment of tragedy as a turning point for us.

Dr. King's words in that jail cell 52 years ago still ring true today: "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation" (MLK, Jr. in [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)).

As Philadelphians, we are well-acquainted with the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ([The Declaration of Independence](#)). As Derrick pointed out to me the other day, "there's a reason why 'life' was listed first, before 'liberty' or 'pursuit of happiness'". It seems we have been confusing the order, placing the pursuit of our own happiness before the lives of others. It's time to change that back around.

Earlier this morning we welcomed a little girl named Fiona into the Body of Christ through the waters of baptism. Every time we baptize someone, we recommit ourselves to following Christ by renewing our Baptismal covenant. One of the things we vow to do is to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being" (BCP 305).

So, where do we start? First and foremost, we begin with prayer, both personal and communal. Prayer reorients us to right relationship with God and each other. But we can't stop there. We also need to get involved in conversations about privilege and racism. Intentionally seek out and listen to the voices of people of color. Read articles and books on these issues. Call people out when they make racist jokes or treat people differently based on the color of their skin. Get involved in community events and learn to know our neighbors. To this last end, this Wednesday night at 6:30pm the Wissahickon Faith Community Association, a local interfaith group, is hosting a Solidarity March to "stand against hatred, violence and intolerance." The march will conclude at Bethlehem Baptist Church with a healing service. I hope you will join me.

One of the most poignant things about the events of last week was the [response of the family members](#) of the martyrs. They shared their pain and grief with the man who murdered their loved ones, but each one of them spoke words of forgiveness, as well. If that's not the Gospel of Jesus Christ lived out, I don't know what is. In the face of tragedy and in the wake of such a demonstration of love, we are compelled to act and respond to our sisters and brothers, "Yes—we DO care that you are perishing!"

Toward the end of Dr. King's letter, he remarked, "...[T]he judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century" (MLK, Jr. in [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)).

Jesus is calling us to action. It's time to get in the boat with him and "go across to the other side" (Mark 4:35).

The 9 martyrs of Charleston
(image found [here](#))

