

## **Roll Down Justice: I Choose Love**

**Luke 23:32-43**

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March 19, 2023

It's been almost eight years since a 21-year-old, white man named Dylann Roof went to a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, one of our country's oldest black churches and long a hub of civil rights activities. Roof was welcomed when he arrived and given a seat at the table for the group's lively conversation. Toward the end of the evening, as others were praying, he stood up, pulled out his .45 caliber gun, and began shooting - ultimately killing nine people as he screamed racial epithets. Later, Roof, a known white supremacist, acknowledged he hoped to start a race war.

On the Friday morning after the shooting, in a courtroom in Charleston, family members of the victims had the opportunity to speak to Roof at his bond hearing. One after another, they spoke of their pain, the intensity of their grief, the tremendous losses they were experiencing. And one after another, they spoke words of forgiveness.

Felicia Sanders, mother of Tywanza Sanders said, "We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fiber in my body hurts ... and I'll never be the same. Tywanza was my son ... my hero ... may God have mercy on you." Bethane Middleton-Brown, representing the family of the Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor acknowledged her hurt and anger but then said, "We have no room for hate. We have to forgive. I pray God for your soul." Alana Simmons, granddaughter of Daniel Simmons said, "Although my grandfather and other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof - everyone's plea for your soul is proof - they lived in love and their legacies will live in love, so hate won't win."

It was a series of statements that left the country amazed. Many of us struggled to understand how they could so quickly come to the place of uttering those words.

We are midway through Lent and so midway through our Lenten sermon series entitled "Roll Down, Justice", and we've come to one of the most difficult topics entangled in this theme. What is justice in the face of the most horrible of crimes? How do we as Christians respond when confronted with the very worst of what human beings choose to do to one another? What does it mean to forgive?

We have all been hurt by others and we have all inflicted hurt. There are those injuries that are deeply personal, individual, and there are those which are systemic. There are hurts we inflict on one other person and those inflicted on whole groups - races, ethnicities, religions. There are hurts we receive or inflict in the present and those we inherit from the generations which have gone before us.

Whatever the wrong, as those who follow Christ, the teachings of our faith about how to respond are pretty clear. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul instructs us in how to behave - "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one

another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Jesus, when Peter asks him how many times we must forgive someone who wrongs us, answers, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” And, of course, Jesus models forgiveness in the face of human cruelty in our scripture reading for today. In two weeks, we will enter Holy Week and be reminded of the horrible events that led to Jesus’s crucifixion - betrayal, beatings, humiliation, false accusation, and, of course, ultimately execution. Yet, while hanging on the cross at the end of all these horrors, Jesus prays to God saying, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do”.

It’s one of the most difficult tasks we are given as Christ-followers, but it can also shape who we are and who we become. That weekend after the Charleston shootings, I heard an interview on NPR with the Rev. Charles Watkins, the pastor of another Charleston AME church. In the interview he was asked if he was surprised by the forgiveness offered by the victims’ families or if he considered it just as it should be.

“Just as it should be,” he answered. “The evidence of discipleship would be our willingness to forgive even the atrocities...And as you understand, to be forgiven, we have to forgive. So, no, I wasn’t surprised at all, and it really showed who we are. The thing that evil needs to understand is that you picked the wrong group. You selected the wrong folk. We will not be deterred. We’ll not be turned around.”

There are many voices in the African American community, however, who say they cannot and will not forgive Dylann Roof, who view this forgiveness as a call or expectation from white America which has been repeated over and over in the power dynamics of our deeply-embedded racism. They point out that African Americans have had to forgive and forgive and forgive, and yet racism still defines much of the American landscape.

So, what enabled the good people of Emanuel AME to offer Dylann Roof forgiveness? I think it is an extraordinarily faithful, deeply held belief about what Christian forgiveness is and what it is not. Recently, I’ve been reading Lewis Smedes book, “The Art of Forgiving”. Smede does an admirable job of examining forgiveness, its relationship to justice, and the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation or restoration.

Forgiveness, he says, is really the inner work of the victim, the person who has been hurt and it is the only way to heal wounds of the past. Forgiveness is saying, “I will not allow you and what you have done to have power over me. I will not allow it to make me bitter or fill me with hate, to define my world or to use up my energy.” Smede goes on, “We do our forgiving in our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them...When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us.”

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean excusing them for what they did or trying to forget about it. Nor does it mean minimizing the impact of what was done to us or inviting someone who hurt us once to hurt us again. Forgiving means recognizing the humanity of the person who wronged us and releasing our desire for vengeance. We still have a right to justice, but justice is different from vengeance. “Vengeance is our own pleasure of seeing someone who hurt us getting it back and then some. Justice, on the other hand, is secured when someone pays a fair penalty for wronging another...Vengeance is personal satisfaction. Justice is moral accounting.”

I suspect that forgiveness is easier in community where you are surrounded by other people who are seeking to live a faithful life of compassion and goodness so that those people, whether they, too, have been injured or not, can hold you accountable to what you say that you believe, to the person you claim you want to be. And can offer you the empathy and love you need so that you don't become embittered and isolated.

Finally, Smede points out that forgiveness does not mean we reunite with the person who hurt us. We sometimes set that up as a false expectation. But, it makes no sense to walk back into a relationship if the other person remains unchanged. Writes Desmond Tutu, "The victims of injustice and oppression must be ever ready to forgive..." But, for restoration or reunion to happen, "Those who have wronged us must be ready to make what amends they can. If I have stolen your pen, I can't really be contrite when I say, 'Please forgive me' if at the same time I still keep your pen. If I am truly repentant, then I will demonstrate this genuine repentance by returning your pen." I think this is an important lesson for those of us who have benefited from racism and privilege in our country.

This brings up a last observation about forgiveness. For Jesus, it's all about being in a right relationship – with God and with each other. In teaching the Lord's prayer, Jesus taught us there is an economy of forgiveness – a relationship between being forgiven and forgiving others. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I think we learn to forgive by being forgiven. When we experience being forgiven, it softens us, reminds us of our own fallibility, and creates room in our hearts, in our psyches, to consider forgiving others. Perhaps that is why so often when a community offers forgiveness, like the people of Emanuel AME church, it is a community of faith. Because our faith teaches us that while each human being is flawed, each human being has the potential to grow, to change, and to become more and more like Christ.

In the aftermath of the Charleston shooting, a woman named Lindy Thompson wrote the lyrics of a song, which Mark Miller, a United Methodist music minister and composer, put to music. The title of the song is "I Choose Love", and I think ultimately that is what Christ asks us to do when we are horribly wronged.

"The people of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston, S.C., chose love when they offered forgiveness in the face of hatred and violence," writes Miller. "We always have a choice. Every day we have a choice—how will the events of your day and your life affect you? It's the challenge of the witness of Jesus—the challenge of a truly faithful life—a daily spiritual discipline for each of us to rise up every day and say "I choose love."

May it be so. Amen.