

## **Peace, Be Still**

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Mark 4:35-41

June 21, 2015

This is not the sermon it was supposed to be. Two weeks ago when I picked this text it was going to be about making space in our lives for silence, making space in our hearts for listening prayers where the still small voice of the Spirit reminds us what is important...and then...Wednesday night happened...

And quiet became an impossible place to go this Sunday. The only quiet ringing in our ears for the last five days has been that line from Dr. Martin Luther King... "in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." No, this is not a Sunday to talk about being quiet...except to listen to the laments of others...an important but brief task...

Some folks have definitely been talking though...Did you see how desperate they were to explain him away? Because he has previously abused prescription drugs, he's a drug addict and he was confused. He's a tragic example of mental illness—except he was frighteningly lucid as he reloaded again and again spouting his hateful intentions. Or they said he's an anti-religion person who randomly chose this church to express his radical atheistic views...except he's part of a Lutheran family that has strong ties to their church.

The ones who said it?...almost all white, male Christians...are desperate to have him be an aberration...to have him be "other"...a fluke...and then yesterday his website was discovered and the investigation notes were released...and the pictures...the stomach churning but all too familiar pictures...of Confederate Flags, and Apartheid era signs and slogans, code words and symbols to identify himself with radical white purity groups and over 2500 words of pro-slavery, white supremacist rantings.

And what we learned...is that he wasn't a fluke...he was just another storm. How odd, how bizarre that his name would turn out to be Dylann Storm Roof...how triply bizarre that this text...a story of a storm...would be the lectionary passage for the day.

Today's text actually picks up right after last week's text...Jesus has been teaching all day in the boat...and he's exhausted...and they decide to go to the other side of the lake...a lake that is one-fourth the size of Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin, just a few miles across. It's not a long trip...but in the middle of the night the storm comes up...and they know about storms...they are fishermen...they know to be frightened...they've been here before...there are no hatches to batten down, no life preservers to throw on...just a little dose of terror...

And there's Jesus still asleep in the bow....

You can almost hear the disciples thinking....How could he sleep through this? How could he let this happen?

You heard some of that on Thursday morning...both the reminders that we've been here before...We've lived in the wake of a storm of racist hatred directed at a church—we've been here when it's been four little girls we mourned, not nine adults at a Bible study...And we've also heard that “what is Jesus doing?” talk too from folks who couldn't imagine a God who would let a human storm like Dylann Roof go into a Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME church, the oldest traditionally black church south of Baltimore in the nation....sit by the pastor for almost an hour and then unleash unholy terror in the night...

Where was God that night, they ask? Where was Jesus to stand up and say, “Peace, be still?” Where for that matter is Jesus in response to the cries that have come too many times from our African-American brothers and sisters this year, and for decades, who too often have had to cry out “don't you care that we are perishing?”

Where is their “Peace, Be Still” for this storm?

We can't fathom it...we know peace won't come in Mr. Roof's punishment...whatever it ends up being...though leaders in the state are already calling for his death....We know...peace won't come from that...

Where can it come from?

Did you hear its whispers on Friday? They were there...

When the daughter of Mother Emanuel's custodian, Ethel Vance, who was killed that night, stood in a courtroom and said... “I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you....you hurt a lot of people but God forgives you and I forgive you.”

And then Felicia Sanders, who was present that night and is the Mother of the youngest victim, Tywanza Sanders, said, “As we said in the Bible study, we enjoyed you...may God have mercy upon you.”

And finally Alana Simmons, granddaughter of one of the four pastors killed that night, Daniel Simmons, Jr., said, “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate ... they...lived in love...Their legacies will live in love so hate won't win.”

Dylann’s former roommate said he had been speaking for months about wanting to start a race war...but with those unspeakably gracious words from the families of those he killed, gracious words born of their deep faith and generations of experience with his kind of hatred, their “Peace, Be Still” quieted what could have become a storm of “tit for tat” exchanges of hatred and violence...

Mark tells the story of the disciples on the water to show that even though they don’t get it...even though their faith is weak...God’s power to transform even terror...is right there in their midst...

The storm that was Dylann Roof is quieted for now...the damage is done...but the raging of the storm has been quieted...in grace.

But other storms still rage...and that shouted question still hangs in the air for us today...we who would follow Christ...knowing full well we are not Christ...We hear the cries of “Do you not care that we are perishing?” And we are not let off the hook by Ms. Simmons, Mrs. Sanders and Ms. Vance...their words of forgiveness do not reach us...at least they shouldn’t...

Because Dylan Roof was a storm we could have predicted...

He all but told us he was going to do something like this...but we weren’t listening...

He told a roommate...who did nothing....

He talked about it to a drinking buddy...who did nothing...

His expressions of hatred were known by some of his family...the same folks who gave him the money in April he used to buy his gun...

This week, we have once again had to confront the reality that this young man’s hatred and violence and inhumanity were grown here...not just in our nation, but in our culture where institutional racism, hatred and inhumanity are thriving. Oh, its destructive winds may not touch us every day, safe in our progressive social, religious, political and economic enclaves...That’s ancient history we tell ourselves and then...a synagogue in Lombard is peppered with hateful

graffiti, or an unarmed black citizen is shot in the back by an angry police officer, or nine brothers and sisters who sought to deepen their faith are slain because of the color of their skin.

But when we confront that, we turn to one another, or to Jon Stewart, or [slate.com](http://slate.com) or even to God and say...What can WE do? How can we make a difference? And our anger and frustration threaten to overwhelm us with their own fearsome waves...

And too often...we rage, we pontificate...and then, swamped by apathy or a sense of our own helplessness, we do nothing...

So is there a solution? Is there something we can do? I wish I knew the answer...but perhaps there are clues for us back in that boat with Jesus.

For Mark, Jesus is the very personification of the maker of the seas...the one who separated sky and water and land...

I want to suggest that Mark is telling us that the Jesus who awakes in the boat is aware of who he is and what he has made...and of what he has the power to control and change...and he uses his power to save.

It begs the question...what do we create?...what do we have the power to control and change? Where can we use the power we have to save? If we are willing to take the time and make the effort...over what do we have agency?

Where do we have the power to make peace in response to the storms of hatred and fear and violence and ignorance that are at the heart of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia today?

Dr. King asked that question...so did Harvey Milk...so did Sojourner Truth...and Susan B. Anthony...

They all refused to accept the lie that the storm tells us...that we are powerless...

Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the slain pastor of Mother Emanuel AME asked that question too...and gave us an answer...In a sermon from 2013 in connection with a Freedom Ride celebration he said that at its best our nation "is about freedom...equality, and the pursuit of happiness." And then he said...

“And that’s what church is all about, freedom to worship, and freedom from sin, freedom to be full [with] what God intends us to be, and have equality in the sight of God. And sometimes we have to make noise to do that, sometimes maybe you have to die like Denmark Vesey to do that, sometimes you have to march, struggle and be unpopular to do that.” Reverend Vesey was the founder of Mother Emmanuel in 1816, and in 1822 when he began to preach against slavery in Charleston and inspire a slave rebellion...they burned his church and lynched him. In the storm-tossed boat of the slavery addicted South, Denmark Vesey cried out “Peace, Be Still” with his words and actions....and it cost him his life.

I want to suggest that for Rev. Pinckney, for Rev. Vesey, for all of these leaders... ..Peace and Be Still...were two different commands...Peace...was about stopping aggression—non-violently confronting and exposing ignorance and hatred, robbing it of its power to inspire more fear and hatred....but “being still” was about being alert...being still enough to take stock...to observe....to stop “doing” long enough to know...what you, what we are capable of...and then setting out to do it....

Maybe....that night on the waters...Jesus command of Peace...applied to the waves and the storm....but “be still” was for the disciples. This is who I am, what I can do he says....so what about you?

What if...for us...Peace is about following the example of those family members on Friday...non-violently, non-hatefully...confronting ignorance and hatred and fear with honesty...with grace...with love.

And Be Still is about figuring out what we actually have the power to change in ourselves and our own spheres of influence...and I think Mark and Jesus also have a suggestion about where we should start....with Fear....You know, we come into the world with only two inborn fears—the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises... All other fears and all hate, to quote Rodgers and Hammerstein, have to be carefully taught. As we grow older our fears multiply and far too often, when we let them control us, they rot into something more sinister, like hatred.

But what if we decided that by following Jesus’ example, we have the power to change that? What if we made of our lives, our families, our church our communities...a place where fear cannot thrive...?

if we committed ourselves to building relationships with the very communities we too often are quick to stigmatize or patronize?

What if we sought ways not to “fix” others, but to understand them...and worked to build trust so that they can understand us?

In today’s prevailing polarized climate...that’s not going to be easy...But it never has been...

What if our “Being Still” in the face of hatred and racism consists mostly of prayerful listening, learning and practicing the not-so-simple act of loving—others and ourselves—

What, if we who are loved unconditionally by the One who made us, let that inspire us to love ourselves and one another and the strangers we meet enough to make stigmas and prejudices and preconceived notions unable to thrive?

Can we make it happen everywhere? That’s not our job and when we look it that way, we will do nothing...Jesus didn’t still every storm in the world that night...but only the one that threatened his boat...and perhaps, by the Grace of God, we can live “peace, be still” ...in our hearts, in our homes, in the many communities we are called to be a part of...

May God working through us make it so...