

In Over Our Heads
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Mark 4:26-34

One of the reasons pastors write sermons at the last minute doesn't just have to do with procrastination. Sometimes what you write days ahead of time just doesn't fit anymore. World events or events within the congregation change things. This is one such time.

When I heard the news out of Charleston, South Carolina about the nine good people of Mother Emanuel AME Church whose lives were taken from them I felt as I'm sure many of you have felt: sad, angry, frustrated. To be honest, I haven't really slept more than a couple of hours these last three days.

I've been thinking a lot about the people who meet for Bible Study in Dineson parlor most Thursday mornings. How we have challenged one another in our faith, and wrestled with the deep questions. The stories we have shared and the deep affection I have for them. The years of prayers we shared with one another for the people in our community, for our family members, for this beautiful broken world.

I've tossed and turned at night thinking about what my dear ones from Thursday morning Bible study would have done if a stranger appeared and asked to sit in. Would we have invited him in?

You can guess the answer. When a stranger arrives to Bible study, we welcome them. We offer them the best seat in the room. We hand them a Bible. We asked them if they have anyone to add to our prayer list. In fact, it has happened a few times over the years.

Isn't that who we want to be?

It's certainly who the men and women gathered at Mother Emanuel AME Church last Wednesday night were. There is no sensible explanation for taking the lives of nine saints in the safety of their faith home. And it is not the first time a terrorist has chosen a sanctuary as the setting for cowardly acts.

Remember the four young girls killed by a bomb set by white supremacists in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church. Or closer to our times, speak with Rev. Dr. Augustus Sealy, pastor of First Church of the Nazarene in Hartford, who was shot multiple times last month as he placed Memorial Day flags on the grounds of his church as his assailants shouted anti-LGBT and drove away.

The forces of hate have tried to make their point clearly: be afraid, be very afraid.

Hatred grows from fear. The coward who walked into that church basement on Wednesday night may have wanted to start a race war, but he won't succeed because the families of those he gunned down have turned again to God - their light and their salvation. Rather than incite more violence, their congregation has responded with forgiveness and mercy and faith. Because they know that's one of the strongest ways to overcome this kind of terrorism.

After all, if the Lord is our light and our salvation, whom shall we fear?

So this morning, I think of the nine who died on Wednesday evening. And I think of the circle of people who have sat in our church's parlor over the years in Bible Study. And I think of their trust in God.

And I will aim to speak the truth today, because of their faithfulness.

We might call him "the clueless farmer". He simply scatters seed and expects them to grow. No tilling the soil, or perfect rows, or watering the ground or pulling weeds. The seed grows by itself, producing grain and an abundant harvest. He goes about his life never really thinking deeply about how or why that happens.

I doubt that many farmers of Jesus' day were so incompetent. Surely they didn't make a habit of throwing seeds haphazardly around, doing nothing more to tend the crop, especially in such an arid region of the world. Growing grain, or fruit or vegetables takes work.

If you've ever had anything to do with gardening of any kind, you know better. Certainly the Jones family was more precise when they decided to plant rows and rows of strawberries for us to harvest. And the folks involved in the Giving Garden spent many hours planning and mapping out their three locations.

I don't think Jesus told this story to teach us about good farming techniques. He spoke to a mostly agrarian crowd who would have known better. Rather, he told it to illustrate how the realm of God, a period of lasting peace and freedom and justice, might become a reality.

I have to think that even his own disciples saw the lack of peace and freedom and justice in the world around them and were a little bit skeptical. They saw the brokenness and the violence and the hunger and pain around them and wondered how (and when) these things would ever come to pass. Just like how some of us today are trying to figure out how to wrap our minds around how to diminish the violence in our society.

Maybe we're all a little clueless. The peace and freedom and justice that Jesus was talking about feels so distant. But it's our calling – as "church" and as individuals - to persevere as we do what we can to scatter the gospel seeds of mercy and kindness and love.

It's a little like being a teacher who gets up each morning and goes to school never fully knowing the impact of her words and actions. She doesn't know what the future will hold for her students.

It's Sunday morning, and I'm just guessing that you are probably a little bit tired. Yesterday was a wet day, and maybe you are feeling discouraged.

Church, keep scattering your seeds. You may never know this weekend the impact of what you've done for someone else. Even the smallest action makes a difference...

Like when you stop what you are doing and ask a frazzled parent if they need help, or when you choose to take a lunch break with an elderly man sitting alone, or when you turn to another volunteer and say "What can I help you with?" Because you know that God's love is real, and you know that God's love is shown best by how we treat one another.

This week we are reminded again that our world can be a frightening and dangerous place. In the midst of our fear, we can call on a God who is reliable and trustworthy. We aren't necessarily shielded from danger, but we know we are not alone.

None of us has the wisdom to know where the seeds of love will grow, but when we scatter them, we do so with faith in the Grower. We are invested in this body of Christ that seeks to bear witness to God's realm of peace and freedom and justice.

Sometimes we will be called to step out in faith, to believe that what we're doing is the loving thing and will eventually bear a good harvest, even if we may not see it.

We persevere in our love, and we look beyond our differences to see the precious child of God before us. Again and again, this is the model of compassion that Christ presented in the gospels and it's the same living water we are called upon to share.

Even when we're cranky, and our backs are sore and our feet ache. Or when we are sick to our stomachs that violence seems to rule the day or that our country may never heal from the sin of racism.

If you feel like you are in over your head, remember that God is working in and through you. Every day. Even in the midst of Strawberry Festival. Have a blessed and fruitful day, beloved. Amen.