

June 25, 2015

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

*“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words...”* ***Romans 8:26-39***

I join our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, in proclaiming Sunday, June 28 a day to mourn and remember the nine Christian martyrs who were murdered by a stranger they had welcomed to Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston on June 17.

Even though we know nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, we continue to pray for these nine disciples (and their families) who died doing what Christ taught them, and who now have claimed their baptismal promises: the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Mr. Tywanza Sanders, the Reverend Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Ms. Cynthia Hurd, the Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor, the Reverend Dr. Daniel L. Simmons Sr., Ms. Ethel Lee Lance, Ms. Myra Thompson, and Ms. Susie Jackson.

As we mourn and remember, it is also a time to repent of the sin of racism that continues to plague our nation and our church. This is not a new realization caused by this terrible shooting. Despite decades of work, legislation and advocacy, the events of the last year, in particular, show us that it is not possible to legislate the state of the human heart.

The continuing struggle against racism is a long-distance race – something we Lutherans know well from our tradition of disaster response. Go…then stay until restoration is evident and progressing. We’re in it for the long haul, for the hard work, willing to do our part in cleaning up a disaster, knowing that love is stronger than hate, and that in all things God is working for good.

Going forward after these first weeks of mourning, praying and listening, we in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod pledge to move forward by seeking the wisdom, counsel, suggestions and blessing of our African American leaders -- lay and clergy.

Many of the Black people I am listening to these days are still in shock and heartbroken that they are not safe even in church, the great sanctuary for African Americans since slavery began.

On the other hand, I have been encouraged by and appreciate the spontaneous and genuine heartbreak, outrage and unity of the Spirit among people of all races.

The whole nation has been touched by the overwhelming grace, mercy and indefatigable faith of the A.M.E. leaders particularly the sermon preached last Sunday as Mother Emanuel courageously and defiantly opened her doors to do what they do – *Welcome* *the world in the name of Jesus.*

Earlier this week after the shootings I wrote personal letters of condolence to the Rt. Rev. Gregory G.M. Ingram, presiding bishop of the First District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (headquartered here in Philadelphia); the Rev. Dr. Mark Kelly Tyler, senior pastor of Philadelphia’s Mother Bethel AME Church, Emanuel’s sister church organized the same year, 1816; and the Honorable Rev. Terrance D. Griffith, president of the Black Clergy Association in Philadelphia. Rev. Tyler was the preacher at our Synod’s worship honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. this January. I work ecumenically with all three men through the Religious Leaders’ Council.

I pray that this terrible event and our response to it will be a tipping point for racial reconciliation in our racist country. This is hard, gut-wrenching work, and none of us can do it alone or without the power of the Holy Spirit.

But oh, Lord God, what if such a miracle happens?  *I want to be in that number*…

With and in Christ

The Rev. Claire S. Burkat

Bishop