

Augsburg and Charleston

Colleagues,

I don't suppose that too many U.S. Lutherans paused this past Thursday—this post's putative date, when it was supposed to have gotten to you—to recall its significance as the anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. The talk in this country this past week was about the murders in Charleston the week before. Those of us who serve as pastors of ELCA congregations got an email on Wednesday from our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, asking us to make the coming Sunday, June 28th, a day of repentance and mourning. As I finally get to compiling this post, it's now the evening of that day.

So here's what I'm sending you tonight. First is the public statement that Bishop Eaton issued on June 18, the day after the murders. Her note on Wednesday asked us to read this to our congregations, and so I did. Next comes the homily I preached when I was done reading. The aim here was to sharpen the reflection, bearing in mind that I was stringing words and thoughts together not for the general public—thus the bishop—but for a couple of groups of profoundly serious Christian people who, like the confessors at Augsburg, are committed to the struggle to believe the Gospel that sinners are justified by faith in Christ crucified and risen. So how does that good news inform our perception of what happened in Charleston and shape our response to it? Those were the key questions I tried to address. I did so hastily, provisionally. Ten minutes after being done I thought of lots of things I should have said but didn't say for all the usual reasons: the preaching time was short, the preaching preps too scanty, the preaching person insufficient for so weighty a task. So be it. I pass it along anyway as piece of rough, unfinished work that may nonetheless

have something in it that you'll appreciate.

Before I get to these things a couple of notes.

First, reader Marvin Huggins sent me the following response to last week's post, number 855: "A bit of a correction to Ed's piece: Jim Burkee is now at Concordia, Bronxville, not Mequon/Milwaukee." Thanks for that.

Second, the Augsburg anniversary prompts a mention of two things you'll want to know about if you don't already. One is the "Luther Reading Challenge," launched a few months ago by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg with the cooperation of Augsburg Fortress and Concordia Publishing House. *Lutheran Forum* editor Sarah Wilson seems to be driving the project. It's billed as a way to honor and prepare for the forthcoming (2017) 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and is [certainly worth a glance](#)—and more. (I've been pitching it to folks in my congregation who show particular interest in grabbing hold of their Lutheran roots.) The other is the recent publication, by Augsburg Fortress, of a two volume [collection of works by Johannes Bugenhagen](#), assembled and translated by Kurt Hendel of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, and, prior to that, of Seminex. Kurt had been working on this project for years, if not decades. Thanks be to God for its fruition.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

On the Murders in Charleston: [Bishop Eaton's Statement](#)

June 18, 2015

It has been a long season of disquiet in our country. From Ferguson to Baltimore, simmering racial tensions have boiled over into violence. But this . the fatal shooting of nine African Americans in a church is a stark, raw manifestation of the sin that is racism. The church was desecrated. The people of that congregation were desecrated. The aspiration voiced in the Pledge of Allegiance that we are "one nation under God" was desecrated.

Mother Emanuel AME's pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, was a graduate of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, as was the Rev. Daniel Simmons, associate pastor at Mother Emanuel. The suspected shooter is a member of an ELCA congregation. All of a sudden and for all of us, this is an intensely personal tragedy. One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own.

We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man. But we know that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly. The Rev. Mr. Pinckney leaves a wife and children. The other eight victims leave grieving families. The family of the suspected killer and two congregations are broken. When will this end?

The nine dead in Charleston are not the first innocent victims killed by violence. Our only hope rests in the innocent One, who was violently executed on Good Friday. Emmanuel, God with us, carried our grief and sorrow – the grief and sorrow of Mother Emanuel AME church – and he was wounded for our transgressions – the deadly sin of racism.

I urge all of us to spend a day in repentance and mourning. And

then we need to get to work. Each of us and all of us need to examine ourselves, our church and our communities. We need to be honest about the reality of racism within us and around us. We need to talk and we need to listen, but we also need to act. No stereotype or racial slur is justified. Speak out against inequity. Look with newly opened eyes at the many subtle and overt ways that we and our communities see people of color as being of less worth. Above all pray – for insight, for forgiveness, for courage.

Kyrie Eleison.

On the Murders in Charleston: Burce's Homily

This past Wednesday the pastors of the ELCA got an email from our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, asking all of us to read the public statement she issued on June 18, the day after those terrible murders in that church in Charleston, South Carolina. So let me do that . . .

Now if you were here last week you heard me talk about these things. If I talk about them again, it's because they bear repeating. Do they ever.

In her statement, Bishop Eaton asks us for two responses to what happened. Repentance is one of them. The other is mourning.

Let's start with repentance. Repentance means getting your head straight. It means getting your heart turned around. In the Bible repentance means seeing things the way God sees them. It means listening to God and taking him seriously. Above all, and in the end, repentance means taking Christ Jesus seriously as the One God has sent to redefine who we are; to make us into people we are not, and couldn't be without him.

"If anyone is in Christ, he, she, is new creation. Look! The old

has passed away. The new has come." We heard that from St. Paul two weeks ago. If you were here then, you might recall that Paul was saying this to people who had heard that very thing many times before, only they hadn't bothered yet to take it all that seriously.

It's time to open your eyes, Paul says. It's way past time to get your wits together—or rather to let the Holy Spirit do that for you as you pay attention to what God is saying about how things really are in the world today on Christ's account.

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So a week ago last Wednesday, a baptized young man, raised in a church just like ours, schooled in the same Bible stories, the same catechism, the same liturgy of Word and Sacrament that we use right here—that young man walks into another church, and by the time he's done nine people lie dead.

As he sat there with them for that hour of Bible study, I don't suppose it once crossed his mind that he was sitting there with members of his own family. And when he pulled out the gun and started firing, I don't suppose it occurred to him that he was shooting Jesus in the face. But that of course is absolutely what happened. "Whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me." That's how God defines what's real in today's world, a world that Jesus rules, God having raised him from the dead to rule it.

Now do I think for a moment that anybody here at Messiah would do as the young man did? Not at all. Even by sinners' standards, shooting nine people dead is a horrible aberration. But having said that, I do know that every person here, myself included, suffers to one extent or another from the same lack of vision, the same failure of faith, that the young man exhibited.

We don't see as God sees. We don't trust the Word that God keeps

putting in our ears to shape our vision, and to correct it.

So, for example, I wonder what would happen here at Messiah if, one Wednesday evening, a young stranger—a young black stranger to use that awful black-white thing we're so stuck on in this country—I wonder what would happen if that young man were to wander in to a Bible study that was unfolding around the conference table in the room that's just below us. What would we see, those of us who were sitting there? Would we see a brother, or at the very least a potential brother? Or would we see a threat? A black threat? A person in a place where he has no business being? How many minutes would go by, I wonder, before someone snuck away from the table to call the police to come check this fellow out?

To me, one of the most remarkable things about that story from Charleston is the way the people there welcomed the young man around their table. They, at least, were using the eyes of faith—their faith in Jesus. Or so it seems.

And the day after the horror, some of their dear ones were using the same eyes of faith in Jesus as they told the young man about their readiness to forgive him for his terrible crime. This startled the world; you may have noticed. It didn't necessarily please the world. In one column I read last week the writer was angry with the relatives for having said what they said—for having dared, that is, to let white racists off the hook again.

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For our part this morning, here at Messiah, let's make a point of thanking God for the witness of the saints. Those saints. The ones in Charleston. Our brothers. Our sisters. That's who they were, in Christ. That's who they are, in Christ.

So we're going to do that at the end of the prayers today, the same way we do it on All Saint's Sunday when we remember the

saints of our own congregation. I'll call the names. The bell will toll. And when you hear the bell toll, let it do what bells in church are also meant to do, which is to pull us into prayer.

Please join me this week—join with Bishop Eaton—in asking the Lord of the Church to bless every Christian in the land with the same set of eyes he blessed those Christians with—the ones who died, that is, and their dear ones too.

Ask him to heal our vision, so that right here at Messiah we make progress in seeing what God sees as he looks at all of us through the lens of Christ crucified. St. Paul again, Galatians 3 this time: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female”—and for sure there is no black and white: what nonsense is that? “For all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise,” sons and daughters of God Most High, no less.

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Let me close with a confession. I get grim sometimes, even despairing, over the possibility that Americans—so-called white Americans like me in particular—will ever get past our wicked addiction to sorting people according to color. I do know that the rivers of words, some angry, some penitent, that have been gushing in our public conversation this past week are not going to make it happen.

In this morning’s Gospel we heard of a woman with an illness that all the doctors in the world couldn’t cure. In her madness, her faithful desperation, she touched the robe of Jesus. And with that, she was a new woman.

Right here, this morning, there is more for you to touch than

Jesus' robe. Here is his body, given for you. Here is his blood, shed for you. Here is forgiveness for your sin and folly, and with it is strength and correction for weak and feeble eyes.

Notice, after all, what's going on here: how the Word of God is prodding us to see Christ, and no one less than Christ, in all these people who are eating and drinking him in. That certainly includes you. It includes everyone else who is eating and drinking with you. So whose face will we be wearing as we step through those doors at the end of the service? And won't the same be true of every other person in America who's been meeting and touching Jesus this morning the way we are here?

So suppose that all these baptized, eating-and-drinking, tasting-and-touching people were to spend this coming week remembering whose face they were exhibiting to the public out there, strangers as well as friends? And suppose that, in their joy and wonder, they were all determined not to embarrass their Lord—this Jesus who, with such inexplicable grace and power, has made their face to be his face, their voice to be his voice, their behavior to be his behavior?

So now there are millions of people out there shining stubbornly with the light of Christ and respecting it in others, the way those saints in Charleston did, and continue to do. Can you imagine what a holy and blessed difference that would make in the tenor of our land these days?

"Your faith has saved you," Jesus says to the woman. God grant such faith to us all. Amen.