"On Charleston and Us,"
a sermon given by Bill Taylor
on July 5, 2015

"'All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us.
We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction.'
Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed.
My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief,
until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees.
What I see brings grief to my soul […]"[1]

These words that Zan just read so beautifully[2] voice the grief of a different people, in a different time, and in a different place. And yet, that description of suffering and that plea for God's help are all too familiar. The cries of this ancient people, as well as the cries of so many others oppressed over the course of human history, echo forward through the ages.[3]

The terrorism in Charleston is just the newest episode in a long and awful history of white terror directed toward black people generally, and toward black churches, particularly. A few of you may remember, for example, the three bombings of the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1956, in 1958, and in 1962. Or the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in the same city in 1963. And some of you may also recall the three dozen black churches that were burned to the ground during the Freedom Summer the next year. And you also may be aware of the hundreds of black churches that have burned in the decades since,[4] including several more just in the last few weeks since the massacre.[5]

White racists target black churches because these places represent so much of what they hate and want to destroy. These are places where black folks seek peace and refuge to worship. These are places where the black community, black culture, and black intellectualism are celebrated. These are places where black souls can love and feel loved in an often hateful world.[6]

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[1] Lamentations ch. 3, v. 46-51

[2] Suzanne Spaihts-Mohns read (ibid) v. 46-57 and assisted with leading the service. I thank her for her contributions.

[3] The congregation sang "Forward Through the Ages" (Hosmer) immediately prior to the sermon.

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/18/us/19blackchurch.html. (The New York Times, 6/18/15)

[5] http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/30/fire-crews-battling-a-blaze-at-historic-black-church-near-charleston/. (Washington Post, Kaplan, 6/30/15)

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/michael-eric-dyson-love-and-terror-in-the-black-church.html (The New York Times, Dyson, 6/20/15) offers an especially eloquent take on this topic.

The Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black congregation in the south, has long been a target of white terror and a battleground for the black struggle. It was founded in 1816 by black members of a Methodist church that discriminated against them. They continued to endure discrimination during the church's first few years, when local and state ordinances limited their worship to daylight hours, demanded that the congregation consist of a white majority, and outlawed black literacy, among other things. Just six years later, in 1822, many of its founders were executed or jailed, when they were implicated in a slave revolt. The church was burned to the ground, and thousands of its members were forced to meet in secret for decades, until the end of the Civil War in 1865.[7]

The terrorist Dylann Roof told police that he specifically targeted the AME church in part because of its place in history. "I almost didn't go through [the shooting]," he also told police, "because everyone was so nice to me."[8]

These were nine beautiful souls with (as we've seen from the pictures shared on the news) the most beautiful faces, opening their hearts and minds to a white stranger in their midst as they studied the bible at the late nine o'clock hour. These were people who believed in a very real sense that God is with us, and they lived accordingly.

And now, they're gone.

We--all of us--must confront why this happened. Surely, Roof is mentally ill, as all murderers are, but the evil that fills his heart and mind was formed from cultural and institutional racism.

And yet, in the wake of the massacre, many in the white majority--including, notably, several media outlets and high profile politicians--were quick to downplay the role that racism played. Many asserted that Roof's motivations were "unknowable." Some even suggested Roof was motivated, not by race, but by a desire to kill Christians![9] And still others were reluctant to call the shooting terrorism, as that term is now so often used as short-hand to refer to acts of mass violence committed falsely in the name of Allah.[10] Even after it was widely reported that Roof told police explicitly that he was motivated by racism, even after survivors from the attack came forward to say that Roof told them explicitly that he was motivated by hate, even after we saw so many menacing images of Roof wearing Rhodesian and South African Apartheid badges and waving confederate flags on our televisions, even after we found his website with a hate-filled manifesto that fully explained his reasoning and inspiration, and even after it was reported that he hoped to inspire a race war, many of us in the white majority have managed to tie ourselves in knots of denial yet again.

And, indeed, this follows a similar pattern of collective behavior that we've seen in the past year (especially) when it comes to issues of race. When stories of brutal and often fatal violence

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[7] http://www.newrepublic.com/article/122070/long-troubled-history-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church. (The New Republic, Egerton, 6/18/15)

[8] http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting-main/. (CNN, Botelho and Payne, 6/18/15)

[9] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2015/06/20/why-republicans-were-quick-to-cite-religion-but-not-racism-on-charleston/. (The Washington Post, Ross, 6/20/15)

[10] http://www.vox.com/2015/6/18/8807433/charleston-shooting-terrorism. (Vox, Fisher, 6/18/15)

employed by law enforcement against unarmed blacks surfaced all over the country, many advocates cried out, "Black Lives Matter." "No, no, All Lives Matter," many in White America insisted, as if the biggest takeaways from these stories were that white lives might, too, be in peril or deemed less worthy. When rage and rioting broke out in Ferguson and Baltimore in response to the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, White America wagged its collective finger. "They're doing this to themselves," we said. Many of us watched on television from our privileged places of comfort and safety as ghettos went up in flames and wondered aloud, "I hope I'll be OK." When a YouTube video showing a white police officer roughing up a 15-year-old, bikini-clad black girl and pulling a gun on a group of unarmed black boys went viral, many looked to excuse his actions, even after he resigned in shame. "Well, maybe those kids didn't belong in that neighborhood," we said. And all along, as advocates and peaceful protesters pleaded with us to focus on the underlying issues--law enforcement's targeting of the black community and their mistreatment of black individuals--many of us ignored them.

With each passing news cycle over the last year, the white majority has managed to deny the importance of race issues that have been presented before us time and time again. We ignored the cries of our black brothers and sisters. We created counter-narratives. We evaded the truth. What we did not do is take them seriously.

But this time, in the aftermath of the Charleston massacre, it must be different. There is nowhere else for the focus to shift. There is no other target at which to point our collective finger of blame. The community there is grieving and angry and healing, but they are not rioting. They want to see some good come out of this.

I was moved to hear the same message of love shared by so many of the victims' family members when they confronted Roof at his initial hearing. "I forgive you," said one such family member. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And may God have mercy on your soul." "I acknowledge that I am very angry," said another. "But one thing that [my sister] always enjoined in our family … is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul." And another family member hearing these pleas for Roof's soul remarked that these were proof that "hate won't win."[11]

But it is up to each of us to ensure that it won't.

It is far past time for the white majority in this country to wake up. We must finally hear the cries of our black brothers and sisters, and we must reach out. The problems that we face are found everywhere in this country, including right here in Haverhill. If you asked our neighbors across the street at the Calvary Baptist Church, I am sure that many would tell you that they live with fear and anxiety about what the future holds for themselves and their children. If you walk outside of this sanctuary in any direction, within a few short steps you will see evidence in various neighborhoods of racial inequality that has persisted for generations.

It is time that we finally bear witness to that which is all around us and make changes. As President Obama said in the days after the shooting, "It is simply not good enough to show

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[11] ibid (CNN, Botelho and Payne).

sympathy."[12] We must speak up for justice and speak out against those who wish to maintain the unjust status quo or seek something worse. Our continued silence makes all of us complicit not only in the sort of awful violence that we saw in Charleston, but in the slow violence of inequality, as well.

But as we have seen in the aftermath of Charleston, there will be some who resist such calls for change, as they always do. For every race issue raised, we'll hear some people reflexively say, "We can't talk about that," for such talk would be "politicizing what happened" or "political opportunism."

They will say that we can't ever talk about the pervasiveness of cultural and institutional racism. We can't ever talk about how prominently flying the flag of a white supremacist army in a public space might inspire racism and offend minorities. (And while we should be encouraged by the very recent progress that we've seen on this front, let us not fool ourselves: this fight is far from over.) Nor can we ever talk about how, as Jon Stewart noted, black folks in South Carolina travel on roads named after Confederate generals, who fought to prevent those people from being able to freely travel on those roads![13]

They will also say that we can't ever talk about implementing common sense gun control laws. We can't ever talk about universal background checks that would keep guns out of the hands of felons, domestic abusers, and the mentally ill. (The mentally ill should have our love, support, and understanding, but they should not have guns.)

They say, in other words, that we can't ever talk about making this world a better place--for all of us. We all should just shrug our shoulders and hope things get better on their own.

The truth is that many in the white majority don't want to talk about these things because they are just not interested in listening to any other perspectives. They don't want to talk about anything other than their own perceived victimization, and they don't want their white privilege disturbed.

This must change. We must finally have a real national dialogue about those issues we too often avoid. That means constructive conversations between leaders at the national, state, local, and even neighborhood levels. That means church groups, and civic groups, and advocates of all political stripes must sit down over pot luck lunches and engage meaningfully with each other and our black brothers and sisters. That means canvassing our cities and towns with messages of love and hope. That means having passionate phone conversations with our representatives and our ignorant friends and our angry uncles. That means that we all say the words "Black Lives Matter" aloud as a unifying affirmation. And while it does not necessarily mean that we all must agree on every progressive policy proposal, that does mean that we all must listen. That does mean that we all must speak and act with intentionality. That does mean that we all must put in the work to realize substantive change. That does mean that we all must care.

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[12] http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/watch/obama-sympathy-is-not-good-enough-468536899602. (MSNBC, 6/19/15)

[13] http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/kb2h42/charleston-church-shooting?xrs=share_fbshare. (The Daily Show, 6/18/15, monologue)

We all must answer the call of our age to make this world a better place. Today, we should remember the words Dr. King shared in his eulogy for the children killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing: "[The victims] say to each of us, black and white alike that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, and the philosophy which produced the murders."[14]

The victims of the Charleston massacre say the same. For Cynthia Hurd, for Susie Jackson, for Ethel Lance, for the Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor, for Tywanza Sanders, for the Reverend Daniel Simmons Sr., for the Reverend Sharonda Singleton, for Myra Thompson, and for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney, we must reach out, and we must do better.

Amen.

[14] http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/eulogy-sixteenth-street-baptist-church-victims.