
Teacher, Do You Not Care That We Are Perishing?

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 7 – Year B

Like you, I'm shocked and saddened by the massacre that took place this week in a Charleston church. As your preacher this morning, I want to stitch up any rips this made in the fabric of your faith and help us all get back to "normal," whatever that is. I want to reassure you that people are good, church is safe, and God will protect you from all harm.

But sometimes, the most faithful response is to not mend the tear too soon, or to jump to the bright, silver lining, but to sit in the darkness, with our grief and disorientation. This is one of those times.

On Wednesday evening, a group of faithful Christians filtered into the basement of Emanuel AME Church for their weekly Bible study. One of the oldest African American churches in the south, Emanuel has weathered more than its fair share of storms: it's been burned to the ground, outlawed, run underground, and toppled by an earthquake. Yet the church still stands and is recognized today as a symbol of black freedom and resilience.

Emanuel's website extends a friendly, open invitation to its Bible study, because the church seeks to be a place of hospitality, a safe haven for anyone in need. So, when a young, white stranger walked into the basement, they welcomed him warmly. And spent another hour with him talking about Scripture. Until he stood up and pulled out a gun.

Twenty-six-year-old Tywanza Sanders tried to talk him out of violence, but he responded with an angry and fear-filled racist cliché, and turned the gun on Sanders' aunt. Sanders asked that the gun be aimed at him instead. When the gunman refused, Sanders dove in front of her and took the bullet himself, in hope that it would be the last.

You've heard the rest of the story, of course. The guest proceeded to shoot almost everyone else there. And fled.

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

Do you not care that more of your beloved children were killed this week? That their families and communities are aching? That sacred space is not always safe space, for everyone?

Jesus, do you not care that we are killing each other here? That we seem to be so violently afraid of each other? That so much anxiety and rage continues to be directed at black bodies and institutions?

Do you not care that a troubled boy—yes, a boy, really—can grow so sick, so wounded, so isolated, so possessed by the demon of racism, that he believes bloodshed is the only way out?

Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?

That's what Jesus' disciples cry out when a storm assails them, and waves and wind beat down on their small boat, while he sleeps soundly on a cushion in the stern.

And *that* is what the people of Charleston are asking today. That's what Christians are asking today. That's what African Americans are asking today, yet again. That's what so many of God's children are asking today, as they cry out—from the storms of illness, abuse, grief, poverty, discrimination: Jesus, don't you care that we are perishing?

It's a hard question to hear. It's a hard question to voice. So, sometimes, before we dare to ask it, we explain it away, reasoning, perhaps, that God must have a plan—that this tragedy must serve a greater purpose. We spring to the defense of God, or our image of God, before letting God speak for Godself.

But that's not how tragedy works, my friends. That's not how grief works. That's not how faith works. Faith doesn't whitewash evil or tidy up tragedy. No, it leaves it open, exposed, and empowers us to live through it. It empowers us to stay where we are, in the middle of the storm. To stay *with* others, in the middle of the storm. It empowers us to open our hearts to the depths of human pain and sin and brokenness, and to call upon God from the bottom of our hearts, "How long, O Lord? Don't you see? Don't you care?"

This question, this prayer, this protest is where faith starts—and healing, and reconciliation.

We are hurting. We have to name this hurt: the hurt we're experiencing and the hurt we're witnessing and the hurt we're inflicting. We have to name it and lament it. When we take it to God, even in anger and impatience, we're confessing that we still have faith that God is there and that God hears and cares. And when we protest the way things are here, we're expressing faith that there *is* another way.

When the storm-weary disciples call out to Jesus, "Teacher, don't you care that we're perishing?" he *does* answer them, by rising up and rebuking the storm, as he rebuked a demon. Because care is not just a sentiment, but also an action. And because he *does* have power over evil after all.

Yes, Jesus cares. He cares enough to be in the boat *with* his disciples. And to be at Emanuel *with* his disciples. He cares enough to be human *with* us, and to lay down his life to save us from ourselves.

Yes, Jesus cares. The question is, do *we*? Do we care enough to risk love—even of strangers, and enemies? Do we care enough to lay down our lives out of love? To sacrifice our way of life for peace and justice, and our righteous anger for mercy and reconciliation? Do we care enough to grieve with others, and to remain with them through suffering and fear and despair, as God stays with us through ours?

Yes, God stays with us. God. With. Us. *Emanuel*. That's why we care—why we *can* care— in spite of the emotional risk involved: because we have faith that God cares for us, and stays with us, too.

So, today, while we await the fullness of God's kingdom-come-on-earth—that glorious kingdom where peace and love reign—God is with us. God hears our prayer. And God calls out to *us* to care, really, deeply, actively, courageously for one another.