

The text for the sermon is from 1 John, at the suggestion of our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton who, this week, provided special resources that in our service today we may enact both repentance and mourning. Hear the word for the Lord from 1 John:

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action....¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;²² and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey God's commandments.. And this is God's commandment: that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.²⁴All who obey this commandments abide in God, and God abides in them. And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that has been given us.

Those two twinned healing stories that we heard in our gospel reading today, are among my favorite Bible stories. They're powerful. And moving. And they're a beautifully structured, from a literary point of view, a story within a story, a healing within a healing. And honestly, I struggled long and hard to write a sermon that would serve our strange and tumultuous national context this week, using these stories.

But as I worked on it, I wrote with the Charleston, South Carolina massacre vying for attention in my brain. I worked on it, but then the Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex came down. I worked on it, but then our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, sent out worship resources to create a different liturgy for this week, a liturgy she called "A Service of Repentance and Mourning." And she caused a stir doing this because the resources for this liturgy were not received in pastors' Inboxes until Thursday by which time most churches have their bulletins printed, as we at St. John's had our printed. So I continued to work on the sermon, using these gospel texts that had nothing to say about our national common life that is front and center to us in these days.

But then I watched our President give the eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney. And if you haven't watched this from start to finish, I urge you to. It's preaching. It's preaching at its finest. And when, on Friday night, I finished listening to his sermon, I realized that I could not finish the sermon I was writing using the gospel readings the lectionary gives us. Instead, I was going to follow Bishop Eaton's directive and use some of the resources she provided for today.

In 1 John we read: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

The preacher in me who has spent all week reading reactions to both the Charleston massacre and the Supreme Court ruling feels irritable in reading that statement. Because if we are children of God, then we need to start acting that way. I'm sorry to say this, but to be perfectly blunt, a great, great many of our fellow Christians, frankly, do not act as redeemed sinner, claimed by grace alone, as children of

God. Our nation is so polarized, so apparently unable to come to common ground on the toxic cocktail of cultural poisons that gave us the Charleston massacre: race relations, gun control, health care.

Somehow managing to ignore the racist culture in which Dylann Roof was raised, Rick Santorum called the event “an assault on religious liberty.” Brian Kilmeade and Steve Doocy of Fox News speculated that maybe this was all about “hostility toward Christians” with Doocy stunned that this was labelled a “hate crime.” And a National Rifle Association board member mused that had Clementa Pinckney been packing a piece in the pulpit, fewer would have died.

Of course, we are harshly divided on other issues, as well: climate change, immigration reform, care of the earth’s resources. And while many, many of us are rejoicing today at the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States, others continue to cherry-pick at scripture to as a way to deny the rite and right of marriage to all. Republican presidential hopeful, Bobby Jindal announced that the ruling “will pave the way for an all-out assault against the religious freedom rights of Christians who disagree with this decision.”

The fundamentalist Christian, American Family Association put out a statement saying “There is no doubt that this morning’s ruling will imperil religious liberty in America, as individuals of faith who uphold time-honored marriage and choose not to advocate for same-sex unions will now be viewed as extremists.”

And the LDS-funded National Organization for Marriage, citing MLK’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” on the moral importance of disobeying unjust laws, makes its case by saying that “The National Organization for marriage and countless millions of Americans do not accept this ruling. Instead, we will work at every turn to reverse it.”

And Fox News Todd Stearnes tweeted, referencing both the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House and the Supreme Court ruling, “If you think the cultural purge over Southern traditions was egregious—wait until you see what they do to Christians in America.”

And I pause here.

I pause here in order that we remind ourselves: *We are Christians in America.*

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

We are children of God and not parrots of a right-wing media machine that prefers to whip up rancor and outrage rather than follow the gospel imperative that we find ways to love each other. Or at least to stop killing each other.

We are Christians in America.

And we *will* name racism. Because it burdens the heart of God when we perpetuate it, willingly or unwillingly.

And we *will* embrace diversity. Because it burdens the heart of God when we exclude and discriminate and deny the rights of others.

And we *will* work for peace. Because the prophet Isaiah tells us to beat swords into ploughshares. And because I believe with every cell in my body that it burdens the heart of God when eight fellow Christians are massacred in a church basement, when

12 are killed in a movie theater, when 26 little ones are murdered in their elementary school and when 30 lives are lost each day to gun violence. I believe those atrocities burden the heart of God and we are called by God to address that madness.

We are Christians in America. And we *will* oppose those, whose Christianity looks nothing like the gospel in action.

The writer of Ephesians puts it forcefully in order to keep us from following those who would pervert the radical love of Christ: “We must no longer be children tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into the one who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”

We are Christians in America. We have an opportunity. We are called to live into the grace that redeems us from that which would harm us.

Let me share with you just a part of President Obama’s eulogy:

“According to the Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It’s not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. Grace.

As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for God has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind and has given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each other — but we got it all the same. God gave it to us anyway. But it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.

For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens. It’s true, a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats, now acknowledge the flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation. We see that now. By taking down that flag, we express God’s grace.

But I don’t think God wants us to stop there. For too long, we’ve been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now. Perhaps this tragedy causes us to ask some tough questions about how we can permit so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career.

Perhaps it causes us to examine what we’re doing to cause some of our children to hate. Perhaps it softens hearts towards those lost young men, tens and tens of thousands caught up in the criminal justice system — and leads us to make sure that that system is not infected with bias; that we embrace changes in how we train and equip our police so that the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve make us all safer.

Maybe we now realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don’t realize it, so that we’re guarding against not just racial slurs, but we’re also guarding

against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal. So that we search our hearts when we consider laws to make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote. By recognizing our common humanity by treating every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born, and to do what's necessary to make opportunity real for every American — by doing that, we express God's grace.

For too long, we've been blind to the unique mayhem that gun violence inflicts upon this nation. The vast majority of Americans — the majority of gun owners — want to do something about this. We see that now. And I'm convinced that by acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and ways of life that make up this beloved country — by making the moral choice to change, we express God's grace. We don't earn grace. We're all sinners. We don't deserve it. But God gives it to us anyway. And we choose how to receive it. It's our decision how to honor it."

And now, let us pray:

We pray to you, almighty God, in this time of conflict. You are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Do not let us fail in the face of these events. Uphold us with your love, and give us the strength we need. Help up in our confusion, and guide our action. Heal the hurt, console the bereaved and afflicted, protect the innocent and helpless and deliver any who are still in peril, for the sake of your great mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen.

O God of unconditional love,
you who showed no partiality in respect to people or nations,
we have heard your good news of great joy for all the people.
We hear that good news and, in hearing, believe.
We know that your sanctuary is a house of worship for all people,
with no regard for the color of skin.
As we worship you, knit us into a people,
a seamless garment of many colors.
May we celebrate our unity, made whole in our diversity.
Forgive us for our inability to let our "old selves" die to the world.
We acknowledge that we participate in structures that are inherently
racist and yet we do nothing to remedy it.
Show us when we fail when we judge others according to the color of
their flesh.