

On June 17, 2015 Dylan Roof joined a prayer meeting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church
After an hour, he shot and killed 9 of the 13 people present at the prayer meeting
Two days later Dylan Roof appeared in court
Family members of the 9 victims were given opportunity to speak...

Nadine Collier, daughter of victim Ethel Lance

"I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

Anthony Thompson, a relative of Myra Thompson

"I would just like him to know that, to say the same thing that was just said: I forgive him and my family forgives him. But we would like him to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that He can change him and change your ways, so no matter what happens to you, you'll be okay."

Felicia Sanders, mother of Tywanza Sanders

"We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with welcome arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fiber in my body hurts and I'll, I'll never be the same. Tywanza Sanders was my son. But Tywanza Sanders was my hero. Tywanza was my hero. ... May God have mercy on you."

Wanda Simmons, granddaughter of Daniel Simmons

"Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone's plea for your soul, is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. So hate won't win. And I just want to thank the court for making sure that hate doesn't win."

Sister of DePayne Middleton Doctor

"That was my sister, and I'd like to thank you on behalf of my family for not allowing hate to win. For me, I'm a work in progress. And I acknowledge that I am very angry. But one thing that DePayne 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."

I am both humbled and awed by these words of forgiveness and grace

To be able to respond with such words so soon after their loved ones were killed

How?

We don't often see this kind of response

There was the Amish who forgave a gunman in 2006 after he killed 10 Amish girls at school

But they were Amish—their ways are not our ways

While we think it laudable that they were able to forgive—it isn't personal

Mostly we see righteous anger and indignation

An effort to hold people accountable for the evil they've done

Families of victims talk in terms of conviction and revenge—often demanding death

Sometimes we see forgiveness extended, but it rings hollow and fake, without substance

We're put off by that as we recognize that it isn't real

But to see forgiveness enacted so quickly through deep emotion and pain touches us deeply
They did not dismiss the horror of what happened or ask that he be released
But they enacted the divine grace of forgiveness—because God forgives, they forgave
Because they refused to participate in hate and let hate win, they forgave
In forgiving, they demonstrated that there is still hope—hope that good overcomes evil
Hope that racism, prejudice, and evil cannot and will not have the last word

When Peter asked how many times we have to forgive—7 times?
Jesus said 70 times 7 – Matthew 18:21-22

Jesus said that whenever we let go of the rope of hate that binds us together, we are free
Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Matthew 18:18 NRSV

How?

Part of our struggle comes from not understanding what it means to forgive
Does forgiving someone mean I forget and pretend it never happened?
Does forgiving someone mean they are free and do not have to face the consequences?
Does forgiving someone mean I required to repair our relationship?

No!

There are consequences—in the case of Dylan Roof, the courts and laws will enact those
Forgiveness does not mean that we should not set strong and healthy boundaries
In fact, they are necessary—See Alice Maxson for help understanding boundaries
When we are deeply hurt, things change and we must find a new normal with right balance

But we must forgive—more for our sake than for the other
In forgiving, we drop the rope of hate that binds us together, we are free

In forgiving, we release the other to God so that God can offer redemption and transformation

In forgiving, we submit to the "stem cell transplant" of God's grace and love

How?

We hear these words of forgiveness as stated by the families of those killed in the church on June 17
And think, I don't know that I could do that and be honest—it's too much

I think the first answer to how is practice

My mother talked about how little traumas prepared her for the big traumas, for which she was grateful

We learn how to forgive in the big things, by creating a habit of forgiveness in little things
We make forgiving others our first motion

I had an elderly great aunt in Salem that never married—as a young adult I lived in Salem several years
She complained that I drove past her church to go to another Friends Church
When she had to move and I took a week's vacation to clean out her house, she made it hard
Don't throw anything away—but of course we had too—and she never let me forget it
Her negative attitude wore me down
My mother says she wasn't so negative when she was younger—in fact she was lots of fun

I realized that I didn't want to become like her—I want a different relationship with family
I made a conscious decision to cultivate positive relationships with nieces and nephews
One day it became clear to me that I'm not anything like my aunt
Practice!

Audrey Mirgon died in January—at her memorial stories were told of her transformation
None was more profound than the one told by her daughter, Terri Mirgon
How a woman full of judgments and fear lost them and became open to diversity and change
The crowd that came and the love people spoke of bore witness to the depth of transformation
Practice! In little things she challenged me with her response of caring rather than judgment

Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina has a legacy of practice
For 200 years the collective body has enacted forgiveness and grace
In 1818, in the midst of great tension, it began as the first black church run by blacks!
They lived out the call to work for civil rights and they enacted forgiveness—time and time again
Their "stem cell transplant" was in place and they lived it out with words of forgiveness in court
Practice

Scarlet Lewis, mother of Jesse Lewis, killed in the Sandy Hook massacre talks about learning to forgive
First because that is what she learned in Sunday School—forgive 70 times 7
She knew she had to get past her anger to access her grief for Jesse
It took time, but she worked through to forgiving the killer and his mother
Then she had to learn to forgive herself
But the anger returns—like a "black cloud that descends" upon her, weighing her down
*"That's when I take a deep breath and make a conscious choice, again, to forgive.
I say the words in my mind and feel them flow through my body. I breathe in eternal life.
...The anger flows out from my fingertips, and I feel relief."*

In forgiving, we submit to the "stem cell transplant" of God's grace and love

As Jesus hung on the cross, he said these words...

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34 NRSV



As we move into open worship, I end with this photo taken by Lloyd Fox / Baltimore Sun

Photo caption: Devante Hill makes a heart with his hands after he was hit with pepper spray after someone threw a bottle at police on Tuesday, April 28, 2015 in Baltimore.

“...aggressive forgiveness we call grace.” Romans 5:20 The Message