

CHARLESTON MOTHER EMANUEL SECOND ANNUAL ECUMENICAL WORSHIP SERVICE

JUNE 17, 2017 – JOEL C. GREGORY, PREACHER

***Romans 12:9 “Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good.”***

Friend of the years, Bishop Samuel Green, has both honored me and burdened me in this occasion. His friendship spans the years and I accept both the honor and the burden. More than that, this second anniversary lays on all of us an *oughtness, an obligation, and an opportunity*. Anniversaries even of pain are painfully necessary. Time takes its toll even on tomorrow when we forget. Days diminish recollection. Many minutes minimize memory. Erosion belongs to creation. Rainfall erodes rock and mountains become plains. Ice freezes in the cracks of stone and boulders become sand. And time diminishes memories that must not be forgotten. I know that there are nine families where every Christmas witnesses an empty chair, every Easter listens for a voice that will never be heard and hands will reach out to grasp a hand that will never be held again. Yet for the rest of us who do not have such intimate, daily recurring reminders we must join in solidarity to stop and remember. If we do not we rob the departed of their dignity and minimize the magnitude of the malicious and malignant act that took them.

When we would rather look the other way, we must remember. When we would wish to avoid the pain, we must embrace it again. We must embrace the hurt of the loss to find a handle on hope for the future. Our faith teaches us that. Embedded forever in Judaism is Passover, the required annual memory making feat, the Seder Meal. It looks back to the pain of enslavement in its bitter herbs but it looks forward in its ringing climax, “next year in Jerusalem.” It is thus

pain and hope together. Even so also the Lord's Supper, the meal celebrated by millions weekly all over the planet. It looks back at pain, the very death of the Cross. But it looks forward in hope to the time we will eat it together with Jesus anew in the Kingdom. In the heart of faith is a memory keeping meal that joins together pain and hope, the awful of the past and the awesome of the promise. So also, this memorial is both pain and hope and it must be that way. If you rip a sheet of steel off the bulkhead of a ship in this harbor and throw it into the water it will sink in an instant. And yet if you rivet that sheet of steel with another and another it will float and stand the storm. So also pain and promise, hurt and help, treachery and triumph. They must both be held together on this occasion.

Hence our text for today: "Abhor that which is evil and cling to that which is good."

The individual who only hates evil degenerates into a cynical, negative, sour, embittered shell who finally sees evil only. On the other hand, those persons whose naïve eyes only see the bright pastels of good deny the very reason for the Gospel. We need redemption. The most common of chemical compounds, salt, consists of sodium and chlorine. Taken apart, sodium and chlorine are noxious and poisonous elements. The yellow-green chlorine gas sears the lungs. Sodium itself is highly irritating to the human body. Yet taken together with chlorine it forms the salt without which life could not exist. Like sodium and chlorine in salt abhorring evil and clinging to good must go together. NaCl together supports life in the ocean and in your blood. Yet take those two elements apart and they are deadly. To do justice to this occasion we must indeed do both: abhor and cling. Abhorring alone leads to despair, SK's sickness unto death. Clinging alone rejects the depravity of the human situation. We must both reject and grasp. Disdain evil and decide for the good, and not do one without the other.

ABHOR THAT WHICH IS EVIL – The evil of evil is evil’s hatred of the good.

What is the face of evil? We would point to child traffickers, the crack house, pay day lending, the destruction of the environment, systemic evil intransigently embedded in the institutions of the privileged. I have no quarrel with that. But all of those individually and taken together are not the final face of evil

The face of evil is evil’s hatred of the good. That June 17, 2015 infamous evening good people were gathered in God’s holy house to study God’s holy word. In all of Charleston there was not more goodness than the goodness in that room. Into that room walked with forethought, intention, premeditation a perpetrator who joined in that righteous circle of biblical discussion. A different race, he was welcomed, seated, encouraged, and embraced. As painful as it is, we cannot honor and dignify the Emanuel Nine without recognizing that disturbing fact. The evil of evil is the hatred of the good.

That is the way of evil. When the sunlight of God shines on goodness the shadow that is cast is evil’s hatred of the good. The covetous person hates the generous person. The liar hates the person of truth. The lustful person hates the pure person. The unmerciful person hates the merciful person. Behind these is the intractable truth that the evil of evil is its hatred of the good.

Towering over all time stands the Cross of Christ, the ultimate example that the evil of evil is its hatred of good. There the mind of the Son of God that only thought God’s thoughts was mauled by a crown of thorns, the hands that only healed pierced by nails, the feet that walked in the will of God bleeding divine blood, and the voice that spoke the parables croaking out “My

God why have you forsaken me.” The evil of evil as the hatred of good is best seen at the Cross. Mockers robbed the occasion of its last shred dignity, “If you are the Son of God, come down.” He had already come from heaven and they wanted three more feet. Evil was stung into murderous fury at the Cross.

*And yet evil always over reaches, forever goes too far, inevitably unmasking itself for what it is and defeats itself by God’s own design. The very evil of the Cross has become the very beauty of salvation. The worst moment of all history has become the brightest light of all history. The One who looked like a victim has been declared victor. His tormentors are the dregs of history and He is the center of history. We only see Pilate and Caiaphas and the mocking Sanhedrin as shadows because of the light of the Cross.*

Likewise, in the same way, the perpetrator of June 17, 2015 does not have the center stage he wanted. His very existence is a shadow that is cast by the light of the luminous goodness of the Nine shining, lustrous, luminescent souls so quickly taken.

Abhor that which is evil but remember that evil always goes a step too far, evil overreaches itself, evil marches a bridge too far.

Go to the great door over of that hallowed church in England, Westminster Abby for 500 years the niches over that door there had no statues. Empty spaces over the door, niches without images. But look up there. There is Martin Luther King, Jr. with a little girl at his feet. There is El Salvador priest killed at his own altar Oscar Romero cradling a little boy. James Earl Ray’s bullet that ripped through the Memphis air on its way to the balcony of the Lorraine hotel had evil etched into it. That projective no sooner stilled the magnificent tongue of that orator of

the ages than millions of people yet unborn to this very day will see that love outlasts hate.

That evil bullet installed MLK forever on at the heart of our national capitol standing forever as a reminder that violence is not the way. That demonic act of assassination placed MLK above the doorway of Westminster Abby looking DOWN on kings and queens for the centuries to come and reminding them that only love lasts and hate destroys

On this day, it is not too much to say that evil over reached itself at Mother Emanuel, evil outsmarted itself in that church hall, evil unmasked itself by going one bridge too far. That day evil exposed itself for what it is – in all the goodness in that Bible study the nation saw that the evil of evil is its hatred of the good. A city came together, a nation stopped and I dare say millions looked deeply each one of them into his and her heart and cried out to God in repentance of prejudice and bigotry and hate. Evil went a bridge too far that day in that fellowship hall.

#### CLING TO THE GOOD

Several years ago, I was on a program with Dr. David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Morehouse. He told a fascinating story from the Civil Rights Movement during the lunch-counter sit-ins. Four black brothers were performing a sit-in when a white boy with mace also sat and threatened them at the counter. When the police came to arrest the protesters, they also arrested the white boy who the protesters nicknamed “Mace.” After a time, Dr. King’s brother came to bail out the protesters and to their astonishment he also bailed out Mace. The protesters were shocked. Something amazing happened. Mace, as if on the spot, did a 180 degree turn and joined in the protest movement.

Does that always happen? No. Is there assurance that such an act of mercy will lead to conversion? No. But there is also the lasting hope that it will. In his November 17, 1957 message at Dexter Avenue Baptist in Montgomery, Alabama, on the front porch of the Civil Rights Movement Dr. King insisted that at the roots of love is redemptive power. Dr. King asserted that when you love an enemy their first reaction will be bitterness. Yet Dr. King asserted his immortal hope that “they will break down under the load.” He was assured of Paul’s triumphant certainty in 1 Corinthians, “Love never fails.” In the same message Dr. King avowed, “Hatred returned for hatred only intensifies hatred.” He told the remarkable story of driving from Chattanooga with his brother A.D. On a long dark road approaching drivers in record numbers refused to dim their lights, blinding A.D. King. A.D. King finally retorted, “I won’t dim mine.” His brother Martin responded, “There will be too much light on the road. There will be a wreck.” Using this analogy Dr. King applied the metaphor. On the highway of history there has been too much hate; nations need to dim the lights. In our personal lives, there has been too much hate; we need to dim the lights.

And yet forgiveness is not easy.

Simon Wiesenthal wrote in 1970 *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*.

The Germans sent Jewish Simon to four concentration camps, including Lemberg. He was force marched through the streets, by a field of radiant sunflowers planted one each over Nazi soldier’s bodies and coerced to carry medical waste out of hospital for wounded German soldiers. A nurse forced him into a room. There lay Karl, a 22-year-old SS, the Schutzstaffel, the dreaded paramilitary organization that terrorized Hitler’s enemies. A bandage circled Karl’s head and he was obviously already being pulled to his own grave by his wounds. He told the

nurse he must talk with a Jew. He told an unbearable story of forcing Jewish women and children into a house soaked with petroleum, throwing in hand grenades, listening to the screams of human burning alive and shooting any who jumped out the windows. With a death grip, he held to Simon's hand and hoped-for pardon. Simon refused to pardon him and walked away.

When Simon went back to the concentration camp his refusal to forgive already haunted him. He asked two Jewish friends if he had done the right thing and they assured him that he had. And yet this man who lived three years short of 100 spent his life haunted by that moment. Famously some 30 famous persons responded to his refusal in a literary symposium at the end of the book. Many agreed that you cannot forgive someone for what they did to someone else. American Lutheran Martin Marty wrote that some traumas are so painful, some atrocities so unbearable and some horrors so incomprehensible that we cannot instruct people to forgive them if they have not been there. God does give some persons astonishing grace at just that point. Families here demonstrated that grace. Pope John Paul II sat down with Mehmet Ali Agca who shot him at direct May 13, 1981. In 1983, he visited his assassin. In 2000, he requested the man be pardoned and he was and went back to Turkey. He converted to Christianity. In 2014, he came back to St. Peter's Square with two dozen white roses to lay on the Pope's tomb.

I agree with Martin Marty who was among the responders. This day I cannot conceive of directing someone to forgive who has experienced a pain I have never experienced. For that matter, what I think I SHOULD do is far from what I WOULD do. The most delicate of all

surgeries is to cut away what a person has done to me from that person as a person. And yet we can all be about

### *Reclaiming the Sacred Space*

This week 45 AME preachers and I have met in the very room where the massacre took place. In its own way, this is a witness that evil did not annihilate, did not eliminate, did not dissipate, and did not abrogate the gospel in that place. Where one pastor's voice was silenced 45 voices renewed their commitment to preaching the gospel. The church did not close, worship did not stop, the message was not silenced and the very space where a pastor was shot during prayer and Bible study became a place where 45 pastors spent four days renewing the sacred craft of preaching. In its own way, it was quiet but very real demonstration that the silencing of one voice was answered with 45 voices of AME preachers and the infamous, vile, treacherous deed of one white man was in a small way answered by the halting instruction of another white man who was there for good and not evil.

St. Isaac's Cathedral in St Petersburg, Russia is the fourth largest church in the world and the largest orthodox basilica. It took forty years to build under the Russian czars from 1818 to 1858. Yet under communism in 1931 that sacred place was stripped of its religious imagery, down came the beautiful dove of the Spirit, and it was named the Museum of Atheism. During the siege of the city by the allies the holy space was used to store potatoes. And yet in 2017 the church was reconsecrated and handed back to the Russian Orthodox Church. The praise of God rings out there, the worship of Christ takes places there, and the blasphemous attempt to



turn the church into a godless museum is now drowned out by the praise of God in that very place.

In a similar way, the tragedy of 2015 did not close Mother Emanuel, the massacre in its hall did not silence the praise of God, the vileness of demonic hate did not shatter the beautiful windows of its storied sanctuary, the falling of the Emanuel Nine did not empty its pews. Surely the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Children not yet born and couples not yet married and homes not yet established and lives not yet called into Christian service will all find their places in the future of Mother Emanuel. And a child will look at the picture of the Emanuel Nine and will be reminded that the evil done there did not end the good that will be done there.