

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In the midst of unthinkable violence, a cry for forgiveness and love

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Why would someone sit in a prayer service for an hour and then shoot those in attendance?

Why are churches often selected as the places to perpetrate such violent acts?

Why would anyone think that such a violent, meaningless act would spark a race war, as was reported by someone who had talked with the shooter?

The country, once again, has been shocked by the act of hate from a single person, in this case, the gunning down of nine people at a Bible study at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

While the act was intended to spark a race war, it has done the

opposite as the city and communities throughout the nation have come together to denounce such

hatred and call for solidarity, acceptance and love.

How does our faith respond to such a terrible deed? How did the faith of this Bible study community respond?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father." (Matthew 5:43-45)

The shooter saw black people as enemy, and hated to the point

of killing. The people in the midst of Bible study and prayer could have seen him as an enemy, but instead invited him in, welcomed him and in so doing loved him.

At the bond hearing, family members of the victims also took the words of Jesus to heart as they pledged to pray for the soul of the perpetrator and even expressed forgiveness.

They affirmed that they were a part of a community of love, not hate, and that even this horrendous act would not dissuade them from pursuing love and forgiveness.

The daughter of one of the victims said of her mother: "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."

One of the survivors of the shooting said, "We welcomed you

Wednesday night in our Bible study with welcome arms. ... May God have mercy on you."

In our world, it is particularly tragic that often, places of worship are the targets of violence.

Last week also saw the destruction by extremists of one of the famous Catholic churches in northern Israel, the Church of the Loaves and Fish. Mosques have been destroyed by ISIS because they were Shi'a and not Sunni. Synagogues and churches are frequent targets.

The president of the organization Religions for Peace said:

"Our country is plagued by a mindset that dehumanizes others who fall outside of the norm. For those of us at the margins of society, we see this often.

Tragedies like Charleston serve as shocking reminders of this reality to the rest of our country.

We are called then to build bridges of justice and to do the hard work of peacemaking."

An important part of peacemaking is not returning evil for evil. The transforming power of faith has been demonstrated in Charleston by the members of the church and the families of those killed.

At that bond hearing last week, the granddaughter of one of the victims said: "Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate — everyone's plea for your soul is proof they lived in love and their legacies will live in love, so hate won't win."

In a world so filled with fear and hate, often expressed by violent acts in houses of worship, let this be our rallying cry: "Hate Won't Win."

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