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SINGLETON, AND MYRA THOMPSON; MARTYRS | JUNE 14, 2020**

EZEKIEL 20:40-42 | PSALM 5 | REVELATION 6:9-11 | MARK 8:34-38

Last summer, around the Fourth of July., Anna and I spent a week down in Charleston, South Carolina. This was probably the fourth or fifth time we had been to the lowcountry since getting married. Since we are both from well north of the Mason-Dixon line, Charleston feels a little bit exotic. And so the trips end up being half beach vacation, half Margaret Mead expedition.

Charleston and its environs are full of gorgeous properties and lush gardens with a great deal of historical significance. And if you've been to Charleston, you know that historic plantation and home tours are a big tourism draw. But because they are usually still owned by the original family, the tours are usually drenched in a kind of Lost Cause mythology. *The original owner may have sold dozens of slaves, fought on the front lines for the Confederacy, and been close friends with Jefferson Davis, but, you know, he wasn't really into it. It was just tradition.*

But last summer we had a quite different experience. At the beginning of a plantation tour, this very mild-mannered guide said that he was going to be saying a lot of things that would make people upset, and we needed to be prepared for that. If he said something we didn't like, he asked us not to interrupt the tour or his talk, but to talk to him after. As you can imagine, Anna and I were both extremely confused.

It turns out this particular plantation was owned by the county, not by a family. Instead of a great-great-grand nephew leading the tour, it was an educator trained in public history. And so the forty-five minute tour of the grounds focused on the history of post-Reconstruction sharecropping. And how the sharecroppers worked the same fields, lived in the same buildings, and were overseen by the same man as the enslaved people a generation prior.

After the tour, we were chatting with the tour guide, and we asked him, "Is the warning at the beginning really necessary? Do people really harass you during the tours?" And he said that it happens all the time. Constantly. And he said that it's because people like a simple story of progress, redemption, and goodness. As if nothing happened in the century between Appomattox and Birmingham. And then he said something that's been stuck in my head ever since. He said, "Because this is the story I choose to focus on, people think that I have some political agenda. But I don't. The majority of people who ever lived on this piece of land were sharecroppers. So I'm telling you about the most common experience people had on this piece of land."

It's easy to imagine those sharecroppers taking on the words of today's psalm. It's a psalm of lament, of protest against bloodthirsty and deceitful evildoers. Against their scheming, the psalmist invokes the righteousness of God. Righteousness, in this context, means faithfulness and mercy. That God's promises, God's covenants, God's compassion, are still resisting the powers of evil. In verse eight, the psalmist claims that the righteousness of God will make their path straight through their enemies. You can almost imagine the psalmist invoking God's righteousness as a kind of companion, a rescue and lifeline out of the presence of danger.

But then the psalm goes in a remarkably different direction. And here's the pivot that's so interesting. In verse twelve, she writes, "For you bless the righteous, O Lord; / you cover them with favor as with a shield." The righteousness of God is not simply a rescue out of evil. It is a gift bestowed on the faithful. God's righteousness makes us righteous. That the faithfulness of God

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allows us to be faithful to our own calling, vocation, and witness. That God's righteousness is not an escape plan out of suffering, but the gift that enlivens our spirits and allows us to trust in the long arc of redemption. Put another way, God's righteousness comes to us through the lives of others.

Today we are commemorating the lives of the Emanuel Nine and venerating them as martyrs. If you know the history of Mother Emanuel, you know the symbolic weight it bears in American history. Founded over two hundred years ago, it is the nation's oldest Black congregation south of Baltimore. Not long after it was built, it was destroyed because of the church's connection with Denmark Vesey, who planned what would have been the largest slave revolt in American history. The congregation was forced to meet in secret until after the Civil War. The new church they built in 1891, the one that stands today, was unusual in that it was a Black church building built by and for the Black community at a time when most Black churches were bought from white churches that were closing down. And it also served as a major hub of organizing during the twentieth century civil rights movement. The list of people who have preached at Mother Emanuel includes DuBois, King, Washington. In short, it's a symbol of Black struggle and liberation and what the psalmist would call righteousness of persistence in the face of evil.

The word "martyr" suggests that these people died because of their faith. Which is obviously true. But it suggests something more than that, too. The word "martyr" comes from the Greek word for witness. In other words, martyrs aren't just people who happened to die because of their faith. They are people whose deaths reveal something to us about God. Their righteousness points us back to the righteousness of God. They are martyrs not simply because they died but because of how they lived. They are martyrs because they make God credible. Because they show that it is possible to live in such a way that we can inhabit the grace of God and respond to evil with goodness.

So it's important to reflect, in particular, on the way those nine people died. They died because they welcomed a stranger into their Bible study. That's not exactly a radical thing to do. But when you know the history of Mother Emanuel it becomes very profound. That after two centuries of being bombarded with violence and burned to the ground and meeting in secret, they chose to respond not by locking down and keeping people away but by keeping their doors open. When the shooter showed up that night and asked to join their Bible study, they could have said no. They could have said that they'd been hurt too many times and they needed to protect themselves. And it would have been easy to understand why. But they invited him inside. They reflected the righteousness of God even though they had every reason not to.

The witness of martyrs often point us to things that are rather difficult to look at. They call us to address evil and seek good, but sometimes the evil they identify is within ourselves. We don't talk about this a whole lot, but the man who killed those nine people was raised in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He went to church on Sundays with his family. Was on the rolls. Did the program. When the psalmist cries out against evildoers, they're not always talking about someone else. Sometimes they're talking about people like us.

We aren't forced to think about the repercussions of that very often. Which is sort of strange. Whenever a Muslim terrorist commits an act of violence, people often ask why there aren't more "moderate Muslims" keeping an eye out for this sort of thing and working to ensure their youth don't get radicalized. As one talking head recently put it, "Where are the moderate Muslims

in America who are stepping up and... calling out terror cells that we know are happening in this country?"¹

But in the five years since that bloody night, I don't think anyone ever asked why more "moderate Lutherans" weren't making sure their youth weren't being radicalized and keeping an eye out for potential terrorists. But the truth is, we should have. If we are inspired by the Emanuel Nine's witness, it should also be matched by a sense of our own moral responsibility.

And I think that's why that tour guide on the plantation made people so upset. It's not because he told them things that were offensive. It's not because he told them things that were factually inaccurate. It's because he was telling them a story that they were a part of. That made a claim on them. And that's what the Emanuel Nine do to us. They make a claim on us. Sometimes that claim makes us uncomfortable. And it should. But it's the discomfort of being lodged free of our willful ignorance and easy excuses.

The official title of today in the liturgical calendar is "Emanuel Nine Day of Repentance." Repentance means turning and going a different way. The way we honor the Emanuel Nine, Clementa, Cynthai-Marie, Susie, Ethel Lee, Depayne, Tywanza, Daniel, Sharonda, and Myra, is not simply by making a statement or putting their names on our calendar. It is by being so moved by their righteousness, by their incarnation of God's grace, that we have no other choice but to go another way as we continue our journey toward the kingdom of God.

May the righteousness of their lives illumine the path we tread. And may light perpetual shine upon them.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Eric Bolling quoted in Erik Wemple, "Fox News Host Asks: 'Where Are the Moderate Muslims in America?'" *Washington Post*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2017/05/23/fox-news-host-asks-where-are-the-moderate-muslims-in-america/>