**June 21, 2015 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost**

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“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Who is this Jesus?  These are his best friends asking this question.  The people who, besides his family, know him best.  And still they have to ask, “Who IS this?”

Well, let’s back up a little and start with who they THOUGHT Jesus was.  As the text today says, they thought he was a teacher.  But they also knew him as a miracle worker, having cast out several demons and healed many people, including Peter’s mother-in-law.  And they must have thought he could do something about the fact that their boat was sinking, although I think they sounded a little passive-aggressive when they said, “Don’t you care that we are perishing?”

And then Jesus does something that, even with all they know about him, takes his disciples by surprise.  He calms the sea.  The text says he rebukes the wind and says to the sea, Peace! Be still!  But he doesn’t stand there and yell at the wind and waves. No, he says, “Peace, be still.  Shhhh.  Calm down.  It’s okay.”  I can imagine him speaking to the sea as if he were a mother soothing a child out of a tantrum.  Shhh, be still.  Be at peace.

THIS is who Jesus is.  The calming, peacemaking, Jesus.

This is the Jesus we claim to be following, yet peace seems pretty far away right now.  The horrific murder of nine people in South Carolina this past week makes that clear, that and the terrible, frightening rhetoric that inevitably followed it.  Let’s be clear – yes, this young man is undoubtedly mentally disturbed, and this certainly was an act perpetrated against Christians, but the fact is, this was an act of racism-fueled terrorism, plain and simple.

I read one article that said that the killer said that he very nearly didn’t go through with his plan to kill all those people.  He almost didn’t go through with it because they were so nice to him.  They accepted him as someone who was seeking Jesus.  They were at peace with him – that same peace of God that we’re talking about here.

And yet, his hatred was so strong that he squashed down those calm, peaceful feelings of love and acceptance in order to carry out his plan of destruction.  His conscience was so weak by that time, that it didn’t stand a chance against his hate.

How can that happen?  Well, look all around us, for starters.  Violence is literally EVERYWHERE.  Violent television, violent sports, violent news, wars, violent speech.  I actually got something in my e-mail saying that we should allow guns in church, either carried by the staff or by armed guards, or even by parishioners. And I read another article that said that Pastor Pinkney was at fault because he stood against allowing guns in church.

No.  Just no.

Jesus didn’t calm the storm with violence, and we can’t calm THIS storm with violence either.  We, as people of faith, need to examine all aspects of our culture, from our entertainment to our language to our politics and foreign policy, and look for ways in which we can make a difference.

But the first thing we have to do is to care.  We have to care deeply about the lost lives of those nine people of God,

The Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney, age 41

The Rev. Sharonda Singleton, age 45

Myra Thompson, age 59

Tywanza Sanders, age 26

Ethel Lee Lance, age 70

Cynthia Hurd, age 54

The Rev. Daniel L. Simmons Sr., age 74

The Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, age 49

Susie Jackson, age 87

These were people with wives and husbands, children and siblings, grandchildren and great grandchildren.  They were people who had good days and bad days, who loved people and disliked, or maybe even hated, people.  They were people who were seeking God through word and prayer.  In that sense, they were just like you and me. And they were people who accepted strangers without fear and without suspicion.  In that sense, they were like Jesus.

And they were also people of color.

We have to care about racism.  Contrary to what some politicians and pundits may say, racism is alive and well in our country.  It rears its ugly head daily in every one of our 50 states, and especially in the District of Columbia, where our laws are made and examined and amended.

People have called this a senseless crime, but it was anything but senseless.  We only call it that because we don’t want to call it what it is – a crime of hate, and in this case, hatred against black people.

To one of the survivors who was trying to talk him out of reloading and shooting again, he said, “I have to do it,” and “You rape our women, and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go.”  To the police he said he was trying to start a race war. This was planned out, carefully researched, premeditated.

In the light of our culture and society today, sadly, this makes all too much sense. The culture of violence and and racial hatred is so deeply ingrained in our society that we can’t even see it at times, nor can we see the privilege that being white brings with it.

Most of us in this church will never have to fear being gunned down while we are at prayer. We don’t have to fear our fourteen year old daughters being thrown down to the sidewalk and dragged by their hair by a police officer because they attended a pool party at Splash Central. We don’t have to fear hearing daily of another teen suicide or attend another funeral for an infant because there is no medical care where we live and no hope for the future.

We take so much for granted.

“Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?” cried the disciples on that sinking boat. Well, WE are perishing, in this country and all around the world. We are killing each other. And Jesus does care. But his answer is not more violence and more hatred. His answer is “Shhh, calm down, be at peace.”

But on the Sea of Galilee that day, Jesus was there in person to settle the waves and calm the wind. As Teresa of Avila said, WE are Jesus’ body in the world. It’s up to US to calm the storms of hatred, violence, and especially racism, that are threatening to swamp this country. It’s up to US to encourage the gentle winds of peace to blow once again.

Like Clementa, Sharonda, Myra, Tywanza, Ethel, Cynthia, Daniel, DePayne, and Susie were that terrible evening, we are gathered together in prayer. Let our prayers this day and every day be for an end to racism, to hatred, and to violence.

But not just our prayers, as important as those are. We need to stand up for justice. We need to recognize racism and speak out against it, here in our home town, and everywhere we go. We need to be activists for change – change in laws that foster discrimination, change in attitudes that favor the status quo of white privilege, and change in our own hearts.

Jesus DOES care that we’re perishing. And if we are following Jesus, so should we.

Amen