**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC 6/21/15**

***Still Stormy***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**REMEMBERING OUR FATHERS AND FATHER FIGURES**

Father’s Day is a good time for us to think about and thank our fathers and our father figures, who have taught us, supported us and encouraged us along our life’s journey. So, if you are so inclined, I invite you to close your eyes for a minute, and bring to mind the face of your father or another person you wish to think about and thank for the role that have played in your life. You might also call to mind a single event or a series of things that you recall.

Let us pray. O God, we thank you this day for the men who have graced our lives; fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, teachers, neighbors, friends and others who have been important to us, helping us to learn about the world, and how to realize our hopes and dreams. May we follow their good example, and help others to do the same. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**THE STORY OF DAVID & GOLIATH** I Samuel 17

Our Old Testament Witness continues the story of the young David, who has been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel, to be the next King of Israel, following Saul. Today we have the well-known story of David and Goliath, the Philistine giant. Goliath is said to be 10 feet tall, wearing a coat of mail armor weighing about 100 pounds. David finds armor uncomfortable, so he selects five smooth stones from the “wadi,” which is a streambed that is dry most of the year. The smooth stones are David’s defense against the giant and the giant's undoing.

The story of David continues, with David presenting the head of Goliath to King Saul. At this meeting, Saul’s oldest son, Jonathan, who is in line to succeed his father as King of Israel, meets David. Jonathan is quite smitten by David. Jonathan gives David articles that represented Jonathan’s own princely rank: his robe, his armor, his sword, his bow and his belt. Later in the story an evil spirit later rushes upon King Saul. Saul becomes jealous and afraid of David and tries to kill him with a spear. David steps out of the way. Twice.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 4:35-41 *Jesus Stills a Storm*

**SERMON**

The Old Testament readings for today about David slaying Goliath and later avoiding Saul's jealous spears, the Gospel reading about Jesus calming the angry sea, and the headlines in today’s news about the horrific killing in Charleston, South Carolina, all point us to a fundamental religious truth.

And the fundamental religious truth is this: our faith does not prevent us from facing conflicts, from facing storms and from facing violence. Our world and our lives are each and all touched by difficulty, pain and even, on occasion, tragedy.

Our faith is not a stained glass bell jar, built to isolate and insulate us from the world and the need to act decisively in it. Our faith calls us to act.

The young David had great faith. His faith led him to challenge Goliath when everyone else was cowering in fear, including King Saul. Later, after King Saul threw spears at David to kill him, David went on to be a commander of a thousand soldiers and eventually King of Israel. Everyone loved David, including King Saul’s son and heir-apparent, Jonathan.

David’s faith does not insulate David from crises. David’s faith gives him the resources and the confidence to overcome unimaginable challenges. God is with David, but God is not a puppeteer. David has to decide what to do and then do it.

If I were in a boat with Jesus, and the boat started to swamp and sink while Jesus slept in the back, you bet I would wake Jesus up, yelling, “Do something, Jesus! Save us!”

My faith would be in Jesus’ having a solution the first time the boat started to sink. On another occasion, I hope I would be faithful enough to find my own solution or to work with others to find a solution to save us.

When Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” I might look at him and say, “Well, I am working on my fears, but I am not quite there yet.”

I would hope Jesus would respond, “Well, you’re getting there. Keep praying and acting decisively, and don’t forget --- I am with you, always.”

When I heard about the killing of nine people, ages 26 to 87 at a church Bible Study in Charleston, South Carolina, on Wednesday, I immediately thought that the young, racist killer should face a firing squad, that he should feel the pain and fear that he inflicted in that church and all around our country.

But then I started hearing and reading what members of the families of those who died were saying, within twenty-four hours of the deaths.

This quote is from yesterday's New York Times (June 20, 2015): “‘You took something very precious away from me,’ said Nadine Collier, daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, her voice rising in anguish. ‘I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul.’”

The Times front-page article pointed out something that I was thinking too: “It was as if the Bible study had never ended as one after another, victims’ family members offered lessons in forgiveness, testaments to a faith that is not compromised by violence or grief. They urged him to repent, confess his sins and turn to God.”

The Pastor and members of the Bible study had welcomed the white, twenty-one-year-old stranger to sit with them and study the Bible, and after an hour of being with them, he took out a gun and announced his intentions.

The people of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and their families took their Bible study to heart. Not even their church building could insulate them from hate and violence, but their faith gave and gives them the resources to deal with hate and violence when it comes calling.

One church member said, “Violence begets violence, and we will have no part of it. That is not our way.”

So I am rather chagrined if not ashamed of my first reaction to stand the killer before a firing squad. Mine is a normal, human reaction: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But Jesus calls us to a higher place, a better place, not returning evil for evil, but letting God be the judge.

I don’t think that I could say, “I forgive you,” to the killer of a family member or friend, at least not right away. But I could tell the killer to repent, confess their sins and turn to God, and after they had done that, perhaps I could forgive them.

The killer’s intention may have been to polarize our country further along racial lines, but in this I think he has failed. His evil deed transcends race and is a strike against humanity, a strike against God. His deed is bringing people together, rather than tearing them apart.

And that is God’s will, God’s will for us in Jesus Christ our Lord, to dwell in harmony. Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

Our Hymn of Response today is appropriately the spiritual, “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian,” which we selected last Tuesday morning before the events in Charleston unfolded Wednesday night.

**BENEDICTION**

And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord, and may the blessings of the Holy Spirit remain with us and inspire us always. Amen.

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