



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Formed to Forgive, No Matter What
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 11, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

'Mom, why don't Black people fight back?' That was the question 11-year-old Anthony Thompson asked as he watched Birmingham police attack and arrest young Black demonstrators with German shepherds and fire hoses as the children and youth marched peacefully, protesting unfair segregation laws. Anthony's mother responded, 'You don't try to hurt people back when they hurt you.'

Four years later in 1967, Anthony went with his mother on a sweltering summer day in Charleston, South Carolina, to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. Anthony remembers, 'I soaked up his words like a sponge, when during his sermon, Dr. King taught me about non-violence. He brought me into a wider understanding of racism's evil. I hung on to his every word, words of such wisdom I will never forget them.'

Eight months later, Dr. King was shot to death here in Memphis. Anthony's teenage heart was broken. A year later, Coretta Scott King visited Charleston. She started a non-violent march on the steps of Mother Emmanuel AME Church in support of disenfranchised hospital workers. Anthony's mother joined Mrs. King, even as the South Carolina National Guard threatened them with bayonets. Nine hundred demonstrators were arrested, including the church's pastor and Anthony's mother. Anthony remembers, "I was afraid for my mother, but very proud of her. When she returned home from jail that night, she told me, 'I'm alright. I didn't get hurt, and we didn't fight them back. I went to jail instead.'" Anthony further reflects, 'My mother showed me, through the wise words of Dr. King that violence and hatred were no ways to live.'

In our epistle lesson from Ephesians today, the Apostle Paul acknowledges that there are times when our anger, often justified anger, will be present. Paul writes, 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger.' As one writer puts it, 'Anger is like fire. It can warm your home or destroy it. It all depends on how it is used.' It is when we

let anger rage out of control that it burns and destroys us and those around us. How do we channel our anger into ways of building up one another?

Ultimately, we look to Jesus and seek to follow him. The Jesus who turned over the tables of the money-changers in the temple is the same Jesus who healed and hugged lepers. His anger propels us to challenge injustices in ways that orient all of us toward loving and serving others, especially those we see as hardest to love.

In Ephesians, Paul summons us to 'put away from us all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us.' That last step, forgiveness, of ourselves and others is perhaps the hardest step.

Forgiveness was a hard step for Anthony Thompson, the young man I mentioned earlier. Years after hearing Dr. King, Anthony became a pastor himself. Along the way, he reconnected with a college classmate named Myra, who had become an eighth-grade teacher. He loved how she reached out to disadvantaged students. They became best friends and soon married.

Anthony supported Myra in her call to ordained ministry. He shared her excitement when she was given the honor for the first time to lead the Wednesday night Bible study at her home church, Mother Emmanuel AME. Myra prepared a detailed outline on the Parable of the Sower from the Gospel of Mark. She entitled her lesson, 'Preparing our Heart's Soil.' Anthony wanted to be there to support her, but she insisted that he go to the church where he is pastor. Myra said, 'Honey, this is your church's first day of Vacation Bible School and you know the ladies will have a lot of drama going on. You need to be at your own church.' Anthony agreed and said he would pick up a seafood dinner for them to share later that night.

As Myra led the Bible study, a young white man arrived wearing a fanny pack. It was not uncommon for tourists and college students to stop by Mother Emmanuel at all hours. So, they invited him to join in their Bible study. When they closed their eyes for the final prayer, the young white man did not close his eyes. At first, he wavered on what he had planned to do because they all seemed so nice. But then, he thought his mission, the salvation of his race, was too important and this moment was too pivotal. He reached into his pack and began shooting. Myra was among the nine who were killed that night.

When Anthony got home with their seafood dinner, he expected Myra to arrive any minute, and couldn't wait to hear how her Bible study had gone. Instead, he got a

phone call that there had been a shooting at Mother Emmanuel. He rushed down there but was not allowed by the police to go inside the church. As he learned of Myra's death, Anthony collapsed onto the ground. A chaplain helped him walk over to a nearby hotel, where the survivors and families had gathered. Anthony stumbled to an empty table in back and rested his head on its cool surface. In agony, he pounded his fists.

Less than 48 hours later, the bond hearing for the shooter, Dylann Roof, was held. Anthony did not want to go, but his children insisted. He had planned not to say a word and to leave as soon as possible. But when the judge asked if any of the family of Myra Thompson would wish to speak, Anthony felt a voice within himself that had to speak. Anthony stood up, took a deep breath, looked directly at Dylann, and said, 'I forgive you. And my family forgives you.' He paused and added, 'But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most: Jesus Christ, so that he can change it and change your attitude. And no matter what happens to you, then you'll be okay. Do that and you'll be better off than you are right now.'

As Anthony caught a sudden glance into Dylann's soul, he reflected, 'Something immediately happened within my heart and mind. I mentally dropped the heavy stones of anger, despair, and hate, and I experienced the unmistakable peace of Christ's love filling my entire being. At that moment, I felt free, as light as a feather. As I returned to my seat, I sensed God calling me to a new purpose, a new beginning, a new mission in Christ to spread the gospel of unconditional forgiveness.'

As the other families were called upon, they too offered forgiveness to Dylann.

This all happened during the summer of 2015. I remember speaking to a fellow priest at that time, who reflected on how deeply formed in Christ these family members were. He imagined their years of participating in worship, Bible study, living in community, building each other up with the cumulative effect of becoming a forgiving people.

In a few moments (at the 8:00 service), we will baptize (we baptized) an adult and a child, LeDorian and Asher. We will offer this prayer:

'Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed on these your servants the forgiveness of sin and raised them to the new life of grace.'

That is Christ's prayer for all of us.
For he is forming us to love and forgive,
no matter what.
Amen.