

Who has visited Charleston, SC? While traveling in the South this summer, Pastor Mark & Leesa Wimmer visited Charleston. I have asked them to share this experience with us this morning.

“The evil of racism was revealed in all its horror with the murder of 9 people at Mother Emmanuel AME Zion church in Charleston SC. The innocents, all of whom were African American, were attending a weekly Bible study when gunned down by a stranger they had welcomed into their midst earlier that evening. Found shortly after the deaths, the racial hatred espoused by the alleged shooter was seen in posting on social media.

The crime was made even more painful knowing both pastors killed were graduates of programs at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and that the alleged killer was himself a member of a Lutheran Congregation.

Racism is learned behavior. So too is forgiveness and acceptance.

Leesa and I recently had the opportunity to visit Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston. The front of the church was bedecked by flowers, candles, small gifts and on specific white boards the signatures of hundreds and hundreds of people who have visited the site as a physical sign of their support and their grief.

We had a chance to speak briefly with a member of the church as he crossed the parking lot. We asked if we could enter the sanctuary perhaps to offer prayer. He said he'd like to, but that he was just leaving and the building was locked. But we'd be most welcome to attend the weekly Bible Study set for 6:30. Leesa and I thanked the gentleman realizing at that moment the 6:30 Bible Study was the same one to which the deadly stranger had also been welcomed.

The ministry of Jesus Christ through Mother Emmanuel Church will not be stopped by the murder of 9 of their own—nor by the horror of racism. The ministry of Jesus Christ cannot be stopped. Neither can our oneness in Christ.

Racism is learned. But so too are forgiveness and acceptance.”

The Rev. Mark & Leesa Wimmer

RACISM – nobody likes to hear the word, it’s uncomfortable to talk about and look for evidence of it in our own lives. And yet this occasion calls us to honesty about our attitudes about African American people, Native American people, Asian people, Latino people, and others who are not Anglo American. None of us is going to burn a cross on someone’s lawn (at least I hope not), but often we still find humor in race, or are afraid of persons of color or where they live, or some may even refuse personal care from a person of a race other than white. Racism hurts others, and it still alive and well within our beings.

Kenneth Wheeler, African American writer, tells this story in the blog “Living Lutheran: Lively Engagement in Faith and Life.” A fellow from the cable company came to connect the Wheelers to a particular cable provider. He finished the job, came up from the basement and spied on the Wheeler’s wall a portrait of President Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. together. The man announced, “The only reason that I watched the inauguration was to see if someone would assassinate him.” That’s racism, and it hurts.

Wheeler observed, “That young white service worker in our home thought that he could say what he did and get away with it because he grew up in that kind of culture, and he believed wrongly, of course, that there was no objection that I could make that he had to hear or honor or that anyone would believe. . . . The solution to the racial dilemma in America has generally been one-sided, as if Black people are the problem. White supremacy is the problem, so let’s talk about that. Let’s talk about that disease that has infected the body politic and the body of the church. Let’s talk about how we get real about this and then commit to seriously eradicating this epidemic, which is just as deadly as Ebola.” ([www.elca.org/en/Living-Lutheran/Blogs](http://www.elca.org/en/Living-Lutheran/Blogs))

Racism does not blend with Christianity in any way, shape, or form. When Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one,” he prayed for color-blindness, or better, that we may be “God’s people: a *seamless* garment of many colors.” Jesus prayed that brown hands and white hands would clasp in friendship, not conflict. Jesus prayed that the color of our skin would not *separate* us but would rather *deepen* a life together in love.

So why are we still talking about racism? Sin, I suppose. Putting others down causes us to feel better about ourselves. Laughing at others averts us from looking at our own shortcomings. Are we *inherently* afraid of those who look different than we do? I don’t think children are. They seem color-blind and learn fear or mistrust from adults. Racism is indeed learned behavior, as Pastor Wimmer said. So can it be unlearned?

Well, with the Lord there is always hope. There are “unlearning racism” and “understanding privilege” workshops, which I’m sure can help. It seems to me that we must first understand and admit that there *is* a problem before we can address it. Then take that to the Lord and open up in confession and repentance, seeking and listening for God’s forgiveness. Then be alert to our own behavior, our own attitude, our own relationships with others.

It seems to me that Christians see everyone as “neighbor,” regardless of color. Christians seek to be Samaritans, caring for the neighbor regardless of who they are. Christians see the bigger picture of justice for all, not excusing behaviors that erode justice or ignore kindness or walk blissfully away from God’s will and ways. Christians see no distinctions and acknowledge the teaching of St. Paul, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves all the children of the world. So should we.

Come now to the altar, one and all, to be blest by Jesus’ wondrous love. As we are open to him, so let us be open to all God’s people as neighbor, sister, or brother. In Christ there is no distinction, no East or West, but 1 community of love. Amen

The Rev. Robert E. Mitman