

“Forgiveness Is a Choice”
June 23, 2019

Luke 23:32-38

As some of you know, I posted a review, of sorts, on my Facebook page this past Tuesday morning. The review was related to a movie, entitled “Emanuel,” which I saw in Manchester on Monday night. And I wanted to be sure and post the review in a timely fashion, because the movie, “Emanuel,” was showing in select theaters across the country on only two nights...Monday and Wednesday of this past week. Not to mention the fact it was one of the best movies I have seen in years.

The title of the movie refers to a high profile, horrific tragedy that unfolded early in the evening four years ago, on June 17th, 2015. A night not hard to remember. Security footage captured a young, white man named Dylann Roof walking into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Roof sat through an entire forty minute Bible study. And as soon as the Bible study participants bowed their heads in prayer at the end of the session, he pulled out a gun and began shooting.

Roof killed eight people on the spot. And fatally injured one more. Only five people in that church hall survived unharmed. And now, four years later, executive producers Viola Davis and Stephen Curry joined forces with noted documentary filmmaker, Brian Ivie, to create a movie that honors and remembers the “Charleston Nine” who died on that fateful night.

As a film, “Emanuel” sets forth two overarching narratives. The first narrative is disturbingly familiar in light of how commonplace it has become in churches and other places of worship across this land. Captivated by racist ideology and fueled by white supremacist websites, “Emanuel” sheds light on the hatred that fueled Dylann Roof’s violence that night. The movie also sets Dylann Roof’s racism against an historical backdrop. Historians estimate that nearly forty percent of all slaves who were kidnapped and brought on slave ships into this country came through the port in Charleston, South Carolina. In fact, the Confederate flag, symbol of our ugly slave history, was removed from South Carolina’s state capitol only in the wake of the Emanuel church shootings.

Meanwhile, Emanuel AME Church, sometimes called “Mother Emanuel,” was the first free-standing black church in the South. Starting with the anti-slavery movement, it’s a congregation that maintains a longstanding commitment to social and racial justice. All of which combined to make it a target four years ago.

The second overarching narrative in the movie is inspirational and far less familiar. During the course of the documentary, the viewer meets various family members of the victims...the ones most intimately affected by the “Emanuel” shootings. One after another they recount what happened on June 17th, 2015 from their own perspectives. They talk about their loved ones with deep affection and respect in the midst of their ongoing grief. And they describe what life has been like for them in the four years since the shootings took place.

In the end, however, the creators of “Emanuel” chose to focus their film on the good that has come out of the tragedy. In keeping with that objective, surprisingly on the day of Dylann Roof’s bond hearing the presiding judge invited family members of the victim to address Dylann Roof directly. And the overwhelming sentiment expressed by those family members was one of forgiveness. Along with hope that God would have mercy on Dylann Roof for what he did.

The forgiveness offered to Dylann Roof, and displayed by family members throughout the movie, gave me a sense of hope. Born out of profound faith in the midst of devastating emptiness, the witness of those loved ones reminded me that our world can be transformed, one act of love and forgiveness at a time, into a place of peace for all God’s people...

There are a number of compelling interviews in the movie, each of them worthy of a sermon. But I want to focus today on one specific interview. It’s the account shared by Felicia Sanders, whose twenty-six year old son, Tywanza Sanders, was shot numerous times by Dylann Roof. Initially, Tywanza Sanders tried to reason with Roof, assuring Roof that no one in the Bible study was out to harm him. And then Tywanza Sanders tried unsuccessfully to cross the room and shield his aunt, Susie Jackson, from Roof’s gunfire.

Simultaneously, Felicia Sanders lay on the floor nearby, pretending to be dead and shielding her eleven year old granddaughter from the hailstorm of bullets. A few yards away from her across the floor, Felicia watched out of the corner of an eye as her son eventually succumbed to his bullet wounds. Yet miraculously, Felicia survived and lived to tell her story.

When it was her turn to address Dylann Roof at the bond hearing, Felicia Sanders had a Bible in her hand. It wasn’t just any Bible, however. It was the same Bible her son Tywanza was using for Bible study the night of June 17, 2015. As she began to speak to Dylann Roof, Felicia Sanders held the Bible high in the air. And then she opened the Bible to the Gospel of Mark, which was the book of the Bible the group was studying that evening.

A number of pages in that Gospel were stained red. Stained red by the blood of her son, Tywanza, as he lay dying on the church floor. “You wanted to kill all of us,” Felicia spoke candidly and pointedly to Dylann Roof. But she shook the Bible in her hand and boldly proclaimed a word of faith. “But you could not kill the Word of God.”

Then Felicia made reference to Jesus Christ, who hung on the cross in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus too was bleeding and dying. And he spoke the memorable words you heard earlier. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” In the name of that forgiving Jesus, Felicia Sanders offered forgiveness to Dylann Roof...

I have to say that the blood shed by Jesus on the cross has never been a major component of my Christian theology. While a number of hymns, especially older hymns, focus on the blood of the cross and a number of other Christian faith traditions tend to focus on Jesus’ blood, it’s never been central for me in how I think and what I profess about Jesus. It’s not that I want to minimize the physical pain and suffering Jesus endured prior to the cross and on the cross. Nor do I need the cross to be sanitized in some way so that it makes the Christian faith more

palatable. The blood of the cross simply hasn't been a large part of what I've been taught and what I've learned on my own about Jesus Christ over the years.

But when I heard Felicia Sanders in the movie a few nights ago, she almost took my breath away. Never before had I heard someone make a connection that raw, that real, that visceral. Felicia Sanders lying on the floor of the church hall, trying desperately to save her own life and spare the life of her precious granddaughter, while somehow finding enough courage to peek over and watch her son bleed to death.

And in the midst of those frightening, anxious, interminable moments, plus so many moments afterwards, Felicia Sanders was able to draw a connection between the blood shed by her son at Emanuel church and the blood shed by God's son on the cross at Golgotha. At the same time, Felicia Sanders was able to draw a connection between the words of forgiveness Jesus uttered to the ones who killed him and the words of forgiveness she decided to utter to the one who killed her son.

"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." In the wake of the movie, I may never think about those words from the Bible the same way again...

It's almost impossible for me to imagine I will ever find myself in the kind of dire place Felicia Sanders was in four years ago. Even if I could imagine that kind of scenario, I don't think I want to. But one of the many things I realized or realized again in the wake of the movie, "Emanuel," is how hard forgiveness is. Sometimes it means reconciling with the very people who have hurt you the most and caused you massive pain and suffering.

By the same token, I think the movie helped me realize or realize again that forgiveness might not be as hard as I think it is. Using my faith to guide me, I wonder whether forgiveness is as simple as asking for God's help. "Father, forgive them, for they don't really know what they are doing. Or sometimes the wording has to be, "Father, forgive them, even though they know exactly what they are doing."

If Felicia Sanders can offer forgiveness to the hate filled young man who gunned down her son at the end of a church Bible study. If Jesus Christ can offer forgiveness to the same people who persecuted him and whipped him and denied him and abandoned him and left him on a cross to die. Then the Christian faith I hold onto calls me to offer forgiveness in my life in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yes, faith empowers me and all of us to make a choice. Forgive in the name of the One whose redeeming love is greater than hatred and bloodshed and death. Amen.

