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Date: June 28, 2015
Sermon Title: Charleston's Forgiveness ... and Ours
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 11:1-4

Luke 11:1-4

*He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.*

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

The pope came out this week with his encyclical about climate change. An encyclical is literally a letter that is meant to be circulated to spur conversation. The "white paper" I wrote last winter, "Christianity, Islam, and Us," was an "encyclical." I kind of like that title, "David's Encyclical."

The pope got a lot of pushback, including from Catholic politicians, who told him to "stick to the Bible" and stay out of politics, policy, and science. Of course, the pope's point is precisely that the world of faith should interface with all the other spheres of influence in our world.

Now, this idea that religious people should "stick to religion" is as old as the hills. When Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," Pharaoh said, "Stick to the Bible. Don't interfere with our nation's economy, job market, productivity. We need those slaves." When the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, tried to get their governments and their kings to straighten up and fly right, they were told, "Stick to the Bible. Don't tell us what to do. You take care of the Temple, we'll take care of the country." In America, when clergy spoke up about civil rights or the Viet Nam War, they were told,

“Stick to the Bible. Stay out of politics.” And now, when the pope says we should care about our planet and act responsibly and regulate compassionately, he is told, “Stick to the Bible. You don’t know science or politics or government.”

A couple of quick points before moving on to my real sermon: First, anyone who says to clergy, “Stick to the Bible, stop sticking your nose into everything else,” obviously hasn’t read the Bible. My Bible is 1,383 pages long, and on every page God is sticking his nose into everybody’s business. I guess God’s point might be, “Hey, since I created it, all of it, it *is* my business, all of it.” That’s how you end up with a Bible that tells us how to treat our neighbors and the poor and the environment and kids, how to do business, run a country and a judicial system.

Second, we like people speaking out about stuff only if they agree with us. If people don’t agree with us, we always want them to mind their own business. Truth is, we’re all in the same business, trying to survive the best we can in the world we live in.

That’s what brings me, us, to Charleston. “Stick to the Bible,” people say, “don’t bring politics into religion.” “Church business should stay inside the church.” Well, let’s see. Almost two weeks ago, a young boy went to the Emanuel Africa Methodist Episcopal Church for Bible Study. He sat next to the pastor, was part of their Bible Study for an hour. Three people were really nice to him, he said later, and almost gave him pause. *Almost*. Instead, he took out his gun and killed nine black Christian Bible Study students. What unfolded the next day makes it difficult for those who want “no politics in religion,” “church stuff should stay in church,” “stick to the Bible.”

The next day we had that extraordinary, almost unbelievable, scene where the victims’ families addressed, *personally addressed*, the murderer with messages of forgiveness, salvation, a call to repentance, and more forgiveness. I’m sure many of you were like me. I tried to put myself in their shoes. I tried to imagine what I would say hours after my loved one was murdered, face to face with the murderer, with the whole nation watching. And nothing I imagined measured up to the “amazing grace,” the “quality of mercy” shared by those families.

And it didn’t stop there. The pastor who preached the Sunday sermon the next Sunday at Emanuel, a week ago today, and the congregation who attended, and the people who lined up to view the body of the dead pastor lying in state in the state capitol building and the neighboring Charleston clergy and all the Christian men and women on the street who were

interviewed, all, as if with one voice, spoke eloquently about Jesus, his message of love, his example of forgiveness.

I've been around a long time. I remember when Billy Graham came to New York City, by popular demand, night after night of evangelical services at Madison Square Garden for six weeks straight. I was at Yankee Stadium to see the pope. I remember when Jimmy Carter was running for president, an evangelical Christian with all the language like "being born again," a Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher. There was Mel Gibson's huge movie, "The Passion of the Christ," and all those TV serials about Jesus, with all the hype and hoopla and P.R. budgets. I remember Martin Luther King, his life and death. And all the coverage of popes' funerals and popes' elections, and popes' messages. I've seen the rise of TV religion, televangelism, and mega churches.

In my lifetime, I have never seen anything like these last 10 days, when the Christian people of Charleston and of Emanuel AME Church spoke the Gospel, preached the Gospel, lived the Gospel with such purity, such clarity, such power. It felt cleansing, like cool water, a fresh breeze after a long, hot day. If there were more of that kind of religion, there would be less call for telling folks to keep religion to themselves. Their message of forgiveness was a clarion call for our world. Our 2,000-year-old "Jesus talk" sounded pretty good.

Many years ago, in another time, with other issues swirling about, a friend said to me that I was preaching too much about forgiveness. So I thought about that. I try to take criticism to heart. I don't want to be a "Johnny One-Note," so I really did think about it in some depth. I soon realized that if you take forgiveness out of Sunday worship, there's not much left. Almost at the start of church we have a confession prayer, then time for your own silent confession, followed by what? The "assurance of forgiveness." Before we are half-settled in our pew, you and I have been forced to look in the mirror, confront our failings, and then, very publicly, have the deacon "assure" you of forgiveness. And what about hymns? Take forgiveness out of the hymns and we're left with a Christmas carol or two. "

*What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear ...*

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me ...*

Remember who wrote that? John Newton, a slave ship captain who delivered plenty of Africans to the slave docks of places like Charleston and killed

plenty along the way. Until he saw the error of his ways and saw his racism face to face, his sins loud and clear. Then he found forgiveness, "Grace," in the presence of Christ.

Still, forgiveness is a hard sell. And the reason is we don't understand it. First, people think forgiveness lets the bad guy off the hook. As if all those Emanuel victims' families in the courtroom were saying to the murderer, "We forgive you. Now, go home, get a job, have a girlfriend, and don't do it anymore."

No, forgiveness is forgiveness, not a pat on the back. Forgiveness gives the other person the chance to live unburdened by hatred. And it gives us, the people doing the forgiving, the chance to live unburdened by bitterness. Because, you see, the second reason for forgiveness is that primarily, *primarily*, forgiveness, in the Bible, is for our own benefit.

Why do you eat healthy? For your own benefit or to help the health food industry? Why do you have smoke alarms in your house? For your own benefit or so the firemen can take a nap? Why do you *not* rob a bank? For your own benefit or so you won't scare the bank teller? Most of the time, we do the right thing for our own benefit, and God understands that. And so, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, we say the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors." "Forgive us our trespasses, our sins, our debts, *as, as much as*, just like, equal to how we forgive those who trespass against us, how we forgive those who sin against us."

And believe me, that's not just an isolated verse, it is consistent and persistent throughout the Bible. It's in the Old Testament; it's in the Gospels, it's in the writings of Paul and John. *And it is absolutely central to Jesus Christ.* On the cross, tortured and bloodied, with his dying breath, looking at his murderers face to face like the folks of Emanuel Church, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness is like an insurance policy, an investment in our future. God is promising to forgive us in the same measure, with the same generosity we forgive others. It's the same idea as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Now, what's interesting about all this is that this matter of God's grace is not a brief sermon preached on a summer Sunday in a little country church before 100 people. Instead, it *is* the "National Conversation." It has been the lead story on the evening news, in the morning paper, all over the Internet. The nation has taken it to heart. The world takes notice.

There's been more movement on race than in the last 10 years. There has been more movement on understanding the Christian faith than in the last 100 years. As I listened to those Charleston folks speak, I felt as though a genie had been let out of the bottle, as though some force we didn't really believe in got out for all to see, and people are saying, "Oh! So *that's* Church! That's religion. That's Christianity. Wow!

Once upon a time, not that long ago, Christianity used to really be something; now we keep being told it's nothing. You know what? Two thousand years ago, Christianity was nothing, and then it became something. It might be useful to see how it got to be something.

This week I found this description of the early church on the Internet. It's so good I'm just going to quote it:

A Love Without Condition

At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in the first three centuries. And Roman society took note. Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!"

Justin Martyr sketched Christian love this way: "We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies." (<http://www.earlychurch.com/unconditional-love.php>)

That's how the church got to be something, and maybe that's our way back. Right now, the focus is on the South, with their Confederate flag and racial history and the Civil War, much of that being based on a warped kind of Christianity. Yet here in the North, our churches are deader than in the South, by and large. And it's a Southern church, Emanuel AME Church, deep in the South at the absolute center of all that racial turmoil, that is showing us all, North and South, the way to be something again so that folks will again say, "Oh, *that's* Church! Wow!"

Forgiveness is a tricky thing. We want it quickly for our friends and ourselves when we mess up. We are a bit slower in giving it to those who hurt us. And surprisingly, sometimes we're slowest to forgive ourselves.

I used to be pastor of a Baptist-Presbyterian church, also called "Emanuel," in Upstate New York. High above the altar and baptistery was a huge hand-carved wooden seashell, *gigantic*. It served two functions. The seashell was

an ancient symbol of Christianity, but it also served as an acoustic help, sending the words and voices of the pastor, the choir, and the church up and out into the congregation, so everybody could hear better and sound better. Every Sunday for years the woodcarver who made it would come to church early, sit in the front pew, staring at this seashell, shaking his head, unhappy. "It's beautiful," everyone told him. "What's wrong? Why are you sad?" The woodcarver would look up at the seashell, "I know where my chisel slipped," he would say. "I know where my chisel slipped." Nobody else knew. But he knew. He knew what he was capable of, and he knew where his chisel had slipped.

Truth is, the chisel slips all the time. In my life, in your life, in our nation's life. We know what we're capable of, but the chisel slips, and things aren't as perfect as we planned. We can ignore our mistakes, just slough them off, tell people to get over it or don't even admit it. We can dwell on our mistakes, like my woodcarver friend, live a life of regrets, guilt, shame. Or, we can follow the model set for us by legions of people in Charleston, South Carolina, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, people who stood for a whole nation and proclaimed the extraordinary Gospel of Jesus Christ: that forgiveness is real, that love is strong, that church is really something!

Centuries ago, we began creating this amazing country. The chisel slipped a few times, but we kept going. After the Civil War we recreated these United States. The chisel slipped again from time to time, but the overall effect was good. The 20th century saw amazing progress in human rights and civil rights and common sense rights, but the chisel still slipped here and there, leaving gouges and cuts where we didn't want them. Still, this America the Beautiful continues to inspire.

And now, in this 21st century, in the summer of 2015, church people from Charleston have put their hands on ours to steady the chisel so that we carve true and straight.

Let's join together and sing Hymn No. 546.

"Amazing Grace."

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;*

*How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my Shield and Portion be,
As long as life endures.*

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.*