

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAGEDY IN CHARLESTON

I join people across this country in sadness regarding the killing of six women and three men, including a pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, at one of the nation's oldest African-American churches located in Charleston, South Carolina. The killer had entered a Bible Study group and had been accepted by those present – the very people he would soon kill. Those present believed that the young man, who was not a regular part of the group and was a visitor to their group, wanted to join them for Bible study and prayer. The young man at first asked to sit next to the pastor and was allowed to do so. About an hour into the meeting, he opened fire on the people there. Three people survived, nine persons died, as they gathered for prayer and Bible study at the historic AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This very church had been burned to the ground in the pre-Civil War era and then met in secret for years because of white hostility toward it. Major civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., had spoken there. This church has been, and is now, a symbol of survival through the long struggle with racism.

It is reported that the killer has been apprehended and identified, a young man named Dylan Storm Roof, and that he has confessed to the killings. But is it really true that the killer has been found? For, in truth, many factors contributed to the killing; and the deluded young man named Dylan Roof is not the only one guilty.

Racism contributed to the killing of the people in the church. The twisted network of assumptions about people with certain skin colors that fosters hate of one group against the other contributed to the killing. The internet has given anonymity and potency and accessibility to racism.

The fear and hesitation to call out racism, which breeds an emotional atmosphere that allows racism to flourish, also contributed to the killings of the people in the church.

A society, neighborhood, and family which allowed a young man to drift away from school at the ninth grade, and move toward a life of chaotic meandering fueled by alcohol and drugs, without redirecting him toward a more wholesome course, but allowed him to move ever more deeply into a deluded, aimless life, and become increasingly vulnerable to racist teachings, also contributed to the murders.

The society and persons who allowed Dylan Storm Roof to acquire a gun this last April, also contributed to the killings.

A society that tolerates and justifies the easy availability of fire arms, even to the point of allowing mentally disturbed people to have easy access to guns, also contributed to the killing of the gentle people gathered for prayer at that church in Charleston.

Politicians who speak moral platitudes about violence in our society, all the while watching event after event in which gun violence plays a role, doing nothing to curb the availability of guns - they too played their part in the killings.

Organizations, such as the NRA (which is said to 'own' Congress) that use financial and political coercion to protect 'gun rights' and destroy the political careers of people who take stands for gun control also surely contributed to this tragedy.

A media which does not explore the vast roots of racism and gun violence, but perpetuates the myth of the 'lone, demented evil-doer' who, when punished, allows us to all feel 'now that is behind us' also plays a part in fostering the conditions that allowed the tragedy in Charleston to happen.

All the people who place all the blame on one person for this horrendous crime, and keep us from seeing the vast roots of gun violence and racism in this country, also contribute to the conditions that made this slaughter of innocents possible.

Surely all of us who allow people in powerful positions to speak falsely about the roots of violence without challenge also contribute to the atmosphere, making events like the tragedy of Charleston possible. A pro-gun chat room posted a message attributed to an NRA board member named Charles Cotton suggesting the pastor who died in the Charleston shooting is culpable for the killings which occurred in his church. The message attributed to Cotton took Rev. Clementa

Pinckney (in his capacity as South Carolina State Senator) to task for not voting in 2011 to expand the right to carry concealed weapons in public places like churches.

"He voted against concealed-carry. Eight of his church members who might be alive if he had expressly allowed members to carry handguns in church are dead," Cotton supposedly wrote. "Innocent people died because of his position on a political issue."

Cotton is a trustee on the NRA Civil Rights Defense Fund board. The NRA consistently maintains that expanding gun access is the only solution to preventing mass shootings, despite repeated studies that suggest that giving more people access to guns only increases the likelihood of a deadly shooting. How can a society survive if people like Cotton are allowed to maintain positions of authority and say the kinds of things he allegedly said go unchallenged?

One hundred thousand people are hit by gunfire in America every year; 32,000 of those die. Dog food, baby toys and cars are far more tightly regulated than guns in America. Forty percent of all gun sales in America occur without background checks. Some major American cities accumulate collectively more gun related deaths in a weekend than countries such as England, Australia or Japan have in a whole year. There are many stores in this country – some Wal-Mart stores among them – that are allowed to stock large displays of high powered weapons as though this is normal or morally acceptable or that people might have a need for military grade weaponry.

I have no answers for how, or if, a society so dysfunctional and so devoid of moral awareness as to allow the conditions of mass killings to happen again and again and again can turn, and change, and forge a different path.

But I do know that this new tragedy in Charleston shows us yet again how important is the work and the mission and the path of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland. You are a light in perilous times. May you continue to flourish in the months and years ahead.

In the face of such situations, we are prone to pull back into despair, and feel unable to do anything constructive. We must resist that negative impulse.

Toward this end, this Sunday, the whole collection will go to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church where the shootings took place, to help the families of those who lost loved ones. There will also be a letter expressing our condolences from the church, which everyone who is present this Sunday will be able to sign before it is sent to Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, as an expression of compassion from this church to theirs.

In the presence of a tragedy like this, we all feel the frailty of life, and the frightening presence of chaos and evil. Such experiences can also, paradoxically, bring us all closer together, in awareness that we are all one in our common humanity and that what we do and say and are really, really matters.

May it be so.

Reverend Ed Brock
Interim Minister