

# Calm to the Waves

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**June 21, 2015**  
**Mark 4:35-41**

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*Let us pray. We thank you this day, O God, for every good gift. We remember fathers and grandfathers and blessed father figures. We thank you for the gift of music and those who offer it. We thank you for our life together as a church community, including those you add to our number. We pray for Emmanuel AME Church, for the city of Charleston, for victims of violence and hatred everywhere and for those who perpetrate it. Grant us your peace, and grant us also a call to justice and reconciliation. As you quiet in us any voice but your own, may your Spirit inspire us as your word claims us. For Christ's sake we pray. Amen.*

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A year ago, at Father's Day, Ann gave me a large magnetic "thing" to apply to the car, about nine inches by nine inches. It says simply "worry less, pray more." "Worry less, pray more." Sometimes I will joke with her, when facing a stressful situation, that I should worry more and pray less, but you get the idea.

Jesus had been teaching all day. Parable after parable, to a large crowd. At the end of the day, it was time to slip away. They got in a boat and started to sail to the other side. Storm winds, strong, gale-force winds whipped up, and the boat was tossed to-and-fro, even to the point of taking on water.

The disciples were terrified, staring at death. Not Jesus. Not only was he not afraid, he was asleep. That is perhaps the best moment of the story – Jesus was asleep!

They woke him up, and fatigued from work and groggy from sleep, he quieted the sea and then turned to his anxious followers. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Worry less, pray more.

Beverly Gaventa writes that "it is easy to get caught up in the interesting but not very fruitful question of whether, and how, Jesus did it." Better to concentrate on the meaning, Gaventa says. "When Jesus calms the storm," she writes, "it is not merely a brute demonstration of power over nature, but a redemptive act in which the chaotic forces of the sea...are 'rebuked.' The miracle has a purpose in the rescue of disciples from fear and disorder." In the face of fright, anxiety, desperation, they turn to Jesus, whose own trust brings peace and "contrasts dramatically" with the panic and chaos of the disciples and the sea. (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, pages 399-401)

I had intended, this morning, to unpack all, or at least some, of the implications of this episode. I had intended to look at anxiety, fear, chaos, despair and desperation, and ask what it means for us to place our trust in this one who is both very powerful and very vulnerable.

I had intended to ask the question – to you, to me, to the church, to the world, whether the issue is Jesus’ power, or our fear, anxiety, distrust – or both.

I had intended to think aloud about soul-weariness, and how we place our souls, entrust our souls – fearful and weary and anxious – to the peace and calm of Jesus. How *do* we worry less, pray more?

Those intentions are still present, but they took a new turn Wednesday evening into Thursday morning as the events of Charleston became known.

The perilous, raging storm took the form of a young man, fueled by racial hatred, armed, entering an African-American church, participating in and observing a Bible study for an hour or more, opening fire, killing nine people, devastating that congregation, devastating that city, devastating a nation, devastating all those who sit in that boat with Jesus and wonder *when* he will wake up, *if* he will wake up, and do something, asking the question how worrying less and praying more will lead to action, action that will take guns out of communities and out of killers’ hands, actions that will lead us to a deeper conversation about race so that justice might flow like a river and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

To read about what happened, to consider what happened, is to stare into an abyss that, frankly, feels more than I can quite handle. But to live as fully human, and to live fully as a child of God, a person of faith, a follower of Jesus, is to do just that.

I must admit that from time to time, when a shooting breaks out in a public space, a school, a movie theater, a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, an Amish school in Pennsylvania, I think about this place, here. We are working hard, by God, to make our church, this place, as open as humanly possible. We lock doors only when we have to. “All are welcome,” we sang as we dedicated our new hymnals. I can imagine a Bible study, Thursday Voices or some other thing, and a stranger walks in, and we would go out of our way to welcome that stranger, delighted that someone would find us, delighted more so that God somehow connected us.

To think that they would bring a gun in with them, or use it, is beyond all my comprehension, so the first fear and terror and anxiety we must place in Jesus’ storm-calming trust is a way, finally, to change how we as a nation think about guns. Whether in the neighborhoods of this city, where people are routinely shot, stories that receive little or no attention, or the well-known instances like this past Wednesday’s, we as a people must finally say enough.

How will we do it? Can we do it? Can we bring our moral and theological voice to bear on politicians, in the name of the Prince of Peace, for change now?

So I must admit that I think about this place every so often when these things happen. But if they ever would, not to be over-dramatic or fearful, if that ever would happen in this place, it would not happen because of the color of my skin.

That is the second tragic burden of Emmanuel AME Church. The chaos of gun violence is multiplied more than exponentially because of racial hatred, depraved hatred, fueled by culture, fueled by twisted faith, fueled by its own version of fear.

While we must do something about guns, the second fear and terror and anxiety we must place in Jesus' storm-calming trust is a way, finally, to talk about race, prayerful talk that leads to change, that leads to justice.

It is our national sin, this legacy of racism that continues to manifest its deep wound in many ways. How must I, first of all, confess my own complicity, whether it's my own internal, even unacknowledged prejudice, or my own reliance, acknowledged or not, on white privilege and power to occupy the places I occupy in church and society.

Then how do we do the same? Then how do we do it with others, including members of the African-American church community, in ways that are not patronizing or driven from our own needs?

I attended a prayer service Thursday night, just down the street, at Baber AME Church, and I came to the realization that I must place myself under the authority of the African-American experience, and the African-American church experience. I, and I believe, we, are not leaders in this conversation, but followers, back pew sitters. But we must show up, and we must have the conversation humbly, confessionally, with ourselves, with our children, with others, putting our trust in this one who has the power to calm storms.

Then what difference will all of this make in the real world – education, jobs, poverty, incarceration? Jon Stewart, of all people this week, spoke of staring into the abyss and seeing a gaping wound. We are called to be healers of that wound, a wound that simply cannot remain open forever. It will leave a deep, deep scar, but a scar is so much better than a wound that will not heal. That is why we simply cannot shrug our shoulders. We cannot.

I was taught that a sermon should have the gospel in it, the gospel of hope. I must admit this week that it's been difficult to find any hope. Perhaps I, and we, can find some in that little phrase, "worry less, pray more." Perhaps we turn that not into a cliché, but a call to action, prayer that leads to action. About guns. About race.

I detected glimpses of hope at that prayer service Thursday night, where speaker after speaker reminded us that evil did not win that night, nor sin, but love. Love wins. It was remarkable to me.

Remarkable too was the response of the families of the victims in Charleston, who, in the face of their grief, were already speaking of forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting, nor does it suggest an absence of grief and rage. It does suggest that they will not live forever with a root of

bitterness and vengeance controlling them, defining them, but rather already are moving toward healing and hope. It was remarkable. And faithful.

Those were lessons they learned from their good pastor, who learned them from a book that was open that Wednesday night, a book that time after time calls us to look into the abyss, a raging storm, and put our trust in the one who says, simply, "peace." Amen.