

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, June 17, 2020. Thank you so very much for tuning in, and spending this time in your day to focus on God and your faith.

Today's topic is one that I could certainly talk about for a very long time, and there are many facets to it. That topic is being human. And my focus today is twofold - remembrance and choosing life.

And I also want to note that today's devotion is going to look slightly different than our devotions for the past few weeks. We will, of course, have prayer, and scripture, and words for contemplation and meditation, but I also will add a litany of remembrance and a longer prayer towards the end of our devotion time together.

This litany is important because today is June 17, 2020. Today marks five years since nine black sisters and brothers in Christ, while gathered for bible study and prayer at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, were killed by professed white supremacist, Dylann Roof. A resolution to commemorate June 17 as a day of repentance for the martyrdom of the Emanuel Nine was adopted by the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on August 8, 2019. Congregations of the ELCA, of which we are one, are encouraged to reaffirm their commitment to repenting of the sins of racism and white supremacy which continue to plague this church, to venerate the martyrdom of the Emanuel Nine, and to mark this day of penitence with study and prayer. The murders of these brothers and sisters, the Emanuel 9, are a tragedy, and as fellow children of God, committed to studying the scriptures and to prayer, we must remember their lives, their sacrifice, and do what we can to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again.

So today as we begin our devotion on being human, on remembering, on choosing life, please join me in a word of prayer:

God, our truth, through the ages you have spoken through prophets. Stir up in your church a passion for your word revealed in Jesus, that following the witness of the Emanuel Nine, your church studies the scriptures, shows hospitality, prays without ceasing, and embodies prophetic justice in community. Embolden church leaders and all the baptized to remember the lives of the Nine, repent of racism and white supremacy, and renew our commitment to your word revealed most fully in Jesus, our way, truth, and life. In your great mercy, receive our prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I know many of us are feeling overwhelmed by all the news we hear these days. News of increased case numbers for covid-19, news of protests, and truly new news of systems being reorganized in ways we have never seen before. All these changes, all this newness, and all this heaviness in such a short amount of time certainly and understandably can lead us to recognizing feelings of being overwhelmed in ourselves. And I certainly join you in feeling overwhelmed at times. Most days, really.

But part of being human is persevering and learning through what is new and growing from the experience. Part of being human is recognizing what is difficult. Being human is not solely centered on the endless pursuit of what is easy or happy. Being human is about making the difficult decision of living, every single day. To be human is to be alive. To be human is to join in connection with other humans as we help and support one another through the beauty and brokenness of life. And while there is certainly joy to be found in being alive, thanks be to God, we recognize the fullness of that joy when we do not shy away from the challenges that we face as well.

We don't just give up on things that are important when they overwhelm us. I know for me personally, for example, going through eight straight years of post-secondary education was extremely overwhelming, but the end goal of being an ordained pastor is absolutely worth all of that work and struggle and challenge and growth. All of us have goals that we have been overwhelmed by at times, but the pursuit and end of the goals is absolutely worth it. Any goal any of us have is worth persisting through, in order to achieve it. We don't take the easy road when the end result is truly worth it. And our focus isn't on all the pain and struggles we had getting to the goal, it is about living into the new reality we created by achieving that goal.

Our Christian faith calls us, above all else, to love God and love our neighbors. The goal these days is to do an even better job of loving all of our neighbors. The goal is to choose life abundant for all people, especially those who have been systematically oppressed. The goal is to live into this holy calling of God to love God and love the people around us, and that love for neighbor, like any loving relationship, has to involve tangible action.

There is a lot of newness and discomfort and growing and learning these days, I know. But we need not do it alone. The choice is simple - the choice is life itself.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

What beautiful and supportive, loving words Jesus gives us. But what I want to point out here, is that Jesus does not say that He will take away our burdens and yokes. Jesus says he will make them lighter and easier. Jesus still says "my yoke" and "my burden". In Christ we find rest for our souls, because Jesus walks alongside us. We do not need to handle these heavy and overwhelming things alone - Jesus is with us in all things, in all our humanness in all we do.

Jesus certainly did not shy away from calling out the injustices of his age - he stood with the poor and oppressed and dined with strangers and people different from Him. Jesus revealed who he was to the Samaritan woman at the well, the women at the tomb on Easter morning, the people who society judged and treated wrongly. Calling out and tangibly changing the systems that oppress and harm people is one of the most Christ-like things we can do. Jesus spent his

time ministering to all people and bringing life, feeding the hungry, raising the dead to life, healing the sick, teaching the curious and downright hostile all the same, and praying to God His Father in heaven. Jesus did not ignore or refuse to minister to people simply because they looked differently or came from a different background than he did. Jesus ministered to and loved ALL people, and especially the people who were poor and oppressed. Jesus calls us to do this work too, in loving God and loving our neighbors. And these calls to tangibly love our neighbors, to stand up for our fellow humans and not turn away from the cruel realities they face, is how we begin to keep them alive.

Working towards life abundant for all people, is not about being perfect, it's about the effort to be better. We cannot ignore our siblings of color dying, and suffering. We must work together, all people, of all racial identities, to choose life and love our neighbors. And yes, this is heavy work. Yes, we need to take time to rest. Yes, I often feel overwhelmed too. But we cannot stop entirely or turn away from these burdens. Life is not about the removal of difficulty or the avoidance of burdens, it is about love, radical love, for God and for one another. We must still carry burdens and take yokes that are heavy, we cannot ignore those realities of being alive, but in Christ Jesus we can find rest. There is deep, lasting joy, not just fleeting feel-good feelings, to be found in working towards this hard and holy calling of life and love for our neighbors.

So how can we find this rest in Christ Jesus? By doing exactly what our sisters and brothers at Mother Emanuel AME Church did until they drew their last - they read scripture and they prayed. Dear friends, my spiritual practice for you this week is to bring it back to some basics. Read the scriptures. I'm particularly fired up and lit up by Deuteronomy 30 this week, and its call to choose the life that God commands us to, but wherever in the Bible you feel called, follow that calling to scripture. And pray. Pray fervently and in a heartfelt way. Name and lift up exactly what you are thinking and feeling, the names of people for whom you pray and wish to remember, and find rest not in the absence of the work of being human, but in the promises that Christ will be with you in all things. If you would like more resources on prayer and litany, I will link to the ELCA page for the Emanuel 9 in this video's description - I received today's prayers and litany from that resource as well.

As we begin this practice of scripture and prayer, I invite you to join me in this remembrance of the Emanuel 9, a remembrance of their vocations, their passions, their livelihood, their humanness - to be remembered not just because they were killed, but because their whole lives matter.

The Witness of the Emanuel Nine: A Litany of Remembrance for Their Vocations

The "Emanuel Nine," of blessed and eternal memory, were nine gifted, loving, and faithful people who spent their lives striving for excellence, connection, and the presence of God, and spent their last moments in study of the word. They leave a legacy of grace, resistance, family, and faith.

Gracious God, in remembering their lives and witness, we are called to a wider understanding of the Spirit's work in the world.

They were preachers: Open us to receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

They were students: Kindle in us a desire to learn and grow in your ways.

They were teachers: Instill in us a passion to share the wisdom of Christ.

They were coaches: Accompany us as we strive to run the race set before us.

They were mentors: Inspire us through the wise counsel offered by others.

They were leaders: Embolden us to seek out the best in others.

They were musicians: Attune us to the sounds of your creation.

They were poets: Reveal your truth in language we have yet to discover.

They were barbers: Shape us as attentive caregivers to those around us.

They were custodians: Protect those whose work ensures our safety.

They were bus drivers: Carry us as companions in life's unexpected journeys.

They were veterans: Remember those who risk harm for the sake of others.

They were librarians: Write on our hearts and minds the wisdom of the generations.

They were advocates: Call us to speak and act on behalf of those who are silenced.

They were public servants: Show us how to love our neighbors as ourselves.

They were legislators: Inscribe your laws of love and justice on our hearts.

In lives of faithful dedication, your servants Clementa, Cynthia, Daniel, DePayne, Ethel, Myra, Sharonda, Susie, and Tywanza lived by your promises, sharing their gifts with those in their families and communities. May we not forget their lives, taken too soon. In the years to come, let us share their names and their witness, so that the world comes to know of your spirit at work in and through them.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

And now please join me in prayer: **Prayer for Racial Justice**

Save us, O God, from ourselves,
from racism often cloaked in pious words,
from the machinations of white supremacy hidden in calls for civility,
from micro aggressions thinly veiled in arrogance,
from apologies when they don't give way to action,
from forgiveness without facing the truth,
from reconciliation without reparation.

Deliver us, O God, from expecting siblings of color to continue to bear this emotional work,
which is not theirs to do.

Grateful for the long arc that bends toward justice, we pray:

Grant us wisdom,

give us courage for the facing of these days,

by the power of the Spirit, all for the sake of the kin-dom that we share in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Thank you for sharing this time today, and I hope you have a beautiful rest of your week. Go in peace, dear friends. Amen.