

HEARTBEATS – Staying Connected

6/25/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was six years ago this past June 17, that Dylann Roof attended a Bible Study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina for nearly an hour. Toward the end of the study, Roof took out a gun, shot, and killed nine African Americans and wounded three more. Included among those killed was the senior pastor of Emanuel and a state senator.

What many don't know is that Dylann Roof was a member of a church in Columbia, South Carolina. In fact, he was on the rolls of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). From this information, we can conclude that all Lutherans hate African Americans, or to be fair, all Lutherans in the ELCA.

That is probably a pretty upsetting statement, especially for we who are part of the ELCA. Certainly, we do not hate African Americans. Many members of the ELCA are African American, and we have many fine pastors who are African American. How could I say such a thing?

But this is exactly what we do based on the behaviors of one from a group with whom we are unfamiliar. We judge the many on the basis of the few. Doing so is just as unfair as it is to judge all Lutherans because of the actions of one. Because the news tends to focus on the negative and/or criminal behavior of some, we may tend to assume that all that are like that individual are the same.

Many in our country are suspicious, at the very least, of all Muslims because of those who overtook planes on September 11, 2001 and crashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Yet, like Dylann Roof, these were individuals who were extremists and are not necessarily representative of all. Unfortunately, we often don't hear about, for example, the many Muslims, including military servicepeople, lawyers, and TV broadcasters, who volunteered to stand watch over synagogues and Jewish community centers following bomb threats and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in Philadelphia and St. Louis at the beginning of 2017.

Such instances are rarely announced but stand in contrast to those other occasions where violent action is reported. What we do hear can color our perceptions about others, including Palestinians, Jews, Arabs, Blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Latinos and Hispanics, and other such groups.

There are several things we can and should do. First, resist the temptation to judge groups on the basis of the actions of a few. Just because one or two behave one way doesn't mean that all from that group are like that. Second, seek the truth. Try to find out more about the beliefs and practices of the larger group when the actions of a few lead you to wonder about them. Third, look for opportunities to get to know individuals from different races or cultures or nationalities. This can be challenging if you have already decided that the entire group can't be trusted. Often, however, you will find people who are very much like you and not the radicals and extremists the media has chosen to highlight. We do a great disservice to large numbers of people when we judge them based on the actions of a few. We can do better.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey