

How quickly things go from life to death.

The disciples have only been listening to Jesus talk for what--  
a couple of minutes?--  
and now the conversation turns to losing their lives.

Jesus started by introducing a new way of life:  
The twelve disciples are to go out and proclaim the good news  
“The kingdom of heaven has come near,”  
performing ministry from village to village, house to house,  
preparing to be reviled and flee if needed.

Then, all too soon maybe, Jesus turns  
from matters of life  
to matters of death.  
And so much death, at that:  
“Do not fear those who kill the body”;  
“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”;  
“[W]hoever does not take up the cross”--  
a well-known instrument of torture and death--  
“is not worthy of me”;  
and finally,  
“Those who find their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

These disciples' work does involve creating new life.  
They are to cure the sick and cleanse the lepers  
and welcome the lost and *raise the dead*.  
But their work also involves dying.  
They are to die to possessions, as Jesus told them to take nothing but  
the clothes already on their backs.  
They must die to ego, as Jesus prepared them to be hated by all because of his name.  
They'll also be dying to any needs for affirmation  
or acknowledgement,  
because Jesus sent them out as essential workers in the Kingdom of Heaven--  
people who will raise the dead and exorcise the demons,  
but who will never receive any praise, recompense, or affirmation in response.

Discipleship, Jesus now makes clear,  
also involves actual death.  
And that, we know, the twelve disciples experienced.

See, tales of the Twelve Apostles' lives--

stories of their curing the sick  
or cleaning the lepers  
or raising the dead--  
those stories are hard to come by.

When early Christians began remembering and commemorating  
and depicting the Twelve Apostles,  
they didn't go with how they looked or what they did,  
*but how The Twelve died.*

We can see this in the Shields of the Apostles that developed,  
which depict all but two of the Apostles  
by how they died.

Andrew, Philip, and Peter all have a form of the cross,  
because they, like Jesus, died by crucifixion.

Paul (who came to replace Judas) and James the Elder  
both have swords to remember their beheadings,  
while James the Younger has a saw to mark his.

Thomas is represented by an arrow that pierced him,  
Bartholomew by three flaying blades that cut him,  
and Matthias in a large axe.

For Simon known as Peter,  
Andrew,  
James son of Zebedee,  
John,  
Philip,  
Bartholomew,  
Thomas,  
Matthew,  
James son of Alphaeus,  
Thaddaeus,  
Simon the Cananaean,  
and Saint Paul:  
how quickly it all went from life  
to death.

\*

Today, we still add names to this list.  
Clementa,  
Cynthia,  
Susie,  
Ethel Lee,

DePayne,  
Tywanza,  
Daniel,  
Sharonda,  
and Myra.

For these Nine  
how quickly it all went from life  
to death.

On June 17, 2015 they were murdered by a self-professed white supremacist  
while they were gathered for Bible Study and prayer  
at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
in Charleston, South Carolina.

Pastors Clementa Pinckney and Daniel Lee Simmons  
were both graduates of our Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary,  
and the man who murdered these saints  
was at least nominally on the rolls of an ELCA congregation.

Like the Twelve Apostles before them,  
the Emanuel Nine died a martyr's death.

They were sharing their faith with the person who killed them.

They sat with him in Bible Study before he murdered them.

They, as the Lutheran Prayer of the Day for commemorating martyrs says,  
"are women and men who have given their lives in witness to God's love and truth."

Because these nine churchgoers are martyrs,  
we've come to remember and commemorate them  
in our Lutheran church,  
albeit very recently.

Last August, the 2019 Churchwide Assembly  
voted to commemorate June 17, the day the Emanuel Nine died,  
as a day of repentance for their martyrdom.

I was a voting member at the national assembly  
and I voted in favor of that resolution.

And so today,  
we commemorate their deaths  
and repent for the nationwide--even church-wide--  
sins of racism and white supremacy  
that caused them.

We repent,  
and we venerate and commemorate these martyrs  
because these Christians were doing the same things any of us are called to do.

They were welcoming a stranger.  
They were sharing the gospel.  
And they did so without reservation,  
because that's what God had called them to do.  
When the shooting started, they tried to talk their assailant down.  
They jumped to protect one another.  
No one lifted a hand in self-defense.  
The Emanuel Nine did everything Christian,  
everything they could,  
to bring life into this situation.  
And how quickly it led to their death!

From the Emanuel Nine,  
from the Twelve Apostles,  
we see that discipleship leads to death.  
This is true.  
For the Twelve Apostles and the Emanuel Nine,  
that was actual death at the hands of another.

And while we pray that Christian discipleship never ends in  
a similarly threatening, violent, targeted, martyrdom death *for anyone*,  
Jesus also calls us to the very same possibility that we might die for our faith.

Today as we commemorate the Emanuel Nine  
and hear Jesus' words to the Twelve Apostles,  
our losing our life for our faith  
means dying to the notion that our church is NOT infected by racism,  
even if accidentally.  
It means dying to the idea that our nation is NOT haunted by a history of white superiority.  
It means dying to the belief that the Civil Rights Movement was over  
once all the schools got integrated.  
This is what it means for us, today, to lose our lives  
in order to find them.

We really resist these kinds of death,  
because we rather like clinging to our comfortable sense of life.  
So of course we get a little scared  
when we realize that Jesus' calling can so quickly turn from life to death.  
After all, Jesus tells the disciples some form of "Do not fear"  
*three times*  
during this teaching.

Perhaps the Lord emphasizes not being afraid

because we can ONLY maintain our fear so long as we *forget*  
that Jesus' calling also,  
just as quickly,  
turns death into life.

Saint Paul's gloss on the matter puts it succinctly:

"[W]e have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death,  
so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead . . .  
so we too might walk **in the newness of life.**"

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his,  
we will certainly be united with him **in a resurrection like his.**"

"If we have died with Christ, we believe that **we will also live with [Christ].**"

Yes, following Christ means we might quickly see life turn to death.  
But the real guarantee,  
the real relief,  
our trust and our confidence,  
is that Christ will always turn death into life.

This is true for the all the martyrs:  
the Twelve Apostles and the Emanuel Nine and the countless others,  
who have died in Christ,  
because they live with Christ now at the right hand of the Father.

And it's also true for us.  
Christ's quick moves from death to life  
don't ONLY relate to eternal life  
but also lead to life *here and now*.

Somewhat quickly, after only five years,  
the Emanuel Nine martyrs are giving life to our Lutheran church here and now,  
as we study racism and white supremacy in its insidious forms  
and repent for the ways it has harmed and still harms  
people of color and, indeed, all of God's children.

How quickly death can turn to new life  
when Lutheran women's groups are having conversations about systemic racism,  
and pastors are joining local anti-racism groups,  
and hymnal committees and musicians are taking stock  
of the language and nuances that perpetuate racism--  
--like all of ours at LCOS are.

How quickly death can turn to new life

when individuals within our church  
are connecting their everyday experience teaching in the classroom  
or healing as a nurse  
or working as a manager  
to the disparities the statistics tell us exist  
--and that we know, deep in our hearts, exist.

This is SOME of what it looks like for a church to experience life after death  
in regards to racism and white supremacy.

But it's only SOME.

It's only a part of the total vision of the church's new life  
after dying to the sin of racism.

The vision for the church's new life might look like  
an earnestly seeking, well-meaning Bible Study member  
not having to ask--as one did on Tuesday--  
"Are there black Lutherans?"  
because we'll actually know them.  
We'll have learned our shared and unshared history,  
and we'll worship together.

A vision for the church's new life  
looks like things that have been covered up--  
like the growth of our Chesterfield suburbs because of white flight--  
being uncovered.  
And secrets--like how suburban whites are still flying--  
being made known.

A vision for the church's new life  
might look like that glorious Day of Pentecost,  
where we're all praising God in many languages,  
having come from many different neighborhoods--  
and I don't mean from Phrygia and Pamphylia  
but from Turner Road and Providence Road.

A total vision for the church's new life  
looks just that: new.  
So maybe it's still hard to totally imagine.  
But as Christians, we're called toward that unimaginable future,  
because that future is already a reality for God,  
and is given to us through Christ,  
so we too--  
our beloved Lutheran church,

our promising nation,  
and ALL of us--  
might walk  
in the newness  
of life.

AMEN.

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko  
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour  
North Chesterfield, Virginia  
June 21, 2020  
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 21:8-21  
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17  
Romans 6:1b-11  
Matthew 10:24-39