

Four years ago, as people were at a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a 21 year old white supremacist, Dylan Roof, who had attended the Bible studies there in the past, entered the church and in a mass shooting took the lives of 9 people.

One of the daughters of the victims is Rev. Sharon Risher, who in real life is a pastor. And while as you might imagine she has dealt with anger and wanting to see him die. But through her pain, her faith has enabled her to find hope and ultimately peace, which she tries to use to change this world for the better.

After the shootings, Sharon made the trip from Charlotte to Charleston, South Carolina, full of dread. She didn't want to be there, didn't want to sit through the trial of the man who'd killed her mother at the church she loved, didn't want to be in the same room with him. Her mom had gone to church for the Wednesday night Bible study, as always, and been gunned down along with eight other innocent souls. They had waited a year and a half, and now, just before Christmas, the trial would begin. Justice would be served—or so Sharon hoped.

Her mom was the last person shot, the last one to die that day, June 17, 2015, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church—or Mother Emanuel as the churchgoers called it. She had witnessed all the violence, then been gunned down by the white supremacist killer. Anger surged through Sharon at the thought of it.

A chaplain prayed with them. She didn't envy his job. A minister herself, she has worked as a hospital chaplain, helping people deal with the trauma of illness, accidents, gun violence. Now the prayers would be for her. She didn't want to be overcome by hate in the wake of a hate crime. She wanted to hold on to her faith, hold fast to God, but it was so hard. Especially now.

The people sat in their seats, girding themselves. The killer came in. He kept his head down, never looking at the victims families. He sat, hardly moving, his posture erect. There was no sign of regret, no remorse. A shiver went through Sharon. He was only 15 feet away, but it was impossible to bridge the gulf between them. Sharon wanted to understand

why he did what he'd done, what awful thing had motivated him, but there was no comprehending. She felt as if she were in the presence of pure evil.

The pastor of Mother Emanuel, Rev. Clementa Pinkney, had been one of those killed. His wife, Jennifer, was the first to testify. Soft-spoken and gracious, she told everyone how she had come into the fellowship hall earlier that evening to say hello to the folks at the Bible study. Then gone into the pastor's office with their daughter.

That's where she was when the gunfire began. She and her daughter moved to an adjoining office and locked the door. They crouched under a desk as shot after shot was fired. They heard the killer try to get in the locked office.

Sharon thought she already knew a lot of the details about what had happened that day, but sitting through the court testimony was torturous. They were shown pictures of the crime scene, and watched a video of the killer talking to FBI agents the day after the shooting. He laughed when he admitted he'd shot those people. Pure evil, Sharon thought.

The killer actually visited the church three times before the shooting, scouting it out. When he arrived at the Bible study that night, the people there invited him in. Sharon could picture her Momma giving him a warm welcome, reaching out, telling him to come and hear the word of God at the place it spoke to her.

He sat with the group for almost an hour. It was only when the members stood and bowed their heads to pray that he took out his gun and started to shoot.

Prosecutors shared her mom's autopsy report. They had to hear about the many bullets that hit her; Sharon could feel them as if they were hitting her own flesh. As they left the court, reporters surged around them. "Rev. Risher, can you give us a comment?" they said. "Just a few words."

She felt sick to her stomach, but she knew she had to speak. The shooting made her think hard about capital punishment for the first time in her life. Before Momma's death, she would have said that a killer like hers, someone who had done something so heinous, deserved to die. But she

had been praying about it and reading about it. Killing this killer wouldn't solve a thing. It wouldn't kill the hate. It wouldn't bring Momma back. She wouldn't have wanted him to die.

Sharon said all that for her Momma.

On December 15, the jury went into deliberations. Two hours later, they were called back to hear the verdict: guilty on all counts. Family members hugged each other and cried. Part of Sharon wanted to celebrate too, but she was so weary. And they still had to get through Christmas. Another Christmas without Momma.

In January, they were back in court for the sentencing. The prosecutors read from the journal that the killer had written in jail: "I would like to make it crystal clear. I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed." No regret, no remorse.

Relatives of those innocent people were allowed to speak. Sharon's cousin Felicia held up her blood-smeared Bible from the night of the shooting. "It

reminds me of the blood Jesus shed for me and you,” she said to the killer. “May God have mercy on your soul.” When it came to be Sharon’s turn, she stared at him. He didn’t look back—she knew he couldn’t—but she knew he heard every word. “I pray,” Sharon said, “that before your life is over, you will call on the name of Jesus for mercy.”

Sharon also prayed for peace, for God’s guidance, and that whatever happened would be in God’s hands. The jury ultimately recommended the death penalty. It was over.

She returned to her new ministry. She recalled how when she was a youngster, her momma had called her down to Charleston’s County Hall to hear the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speak powerful words of love and forgiveness, to know that she had been called to speak too.

A couple weeks after the trial, Sharon addressed a group at Limestone College in Gaffney, South Carolina, for their Martin Luther King, Jr., Day observance. She wore a green dress to the occasion because green was her Momma’s favorite color. The deeper work, though, had to be internal. She’d heard a preacher once, on a roll, tell his congregation that

forgiveness should be instant. We could all do it at the drop of a hat. Sharon says she begs to differ. She'd been praying and working at it, but she also knew, as someone who has struggled with depression, that anger couldn't just be buried. It was too dangerous. Her Momma's death and all that had happened since, all that she had felt during the trial, couldn't just be swept aside. She wasn't going to run away from it. She could move forward only with God's help.

Then one day, in church, she felt this warmth spread over her and words as though God were whispering to her: "Okay, it's time. You've done all the work. You're ready to get past this, to get past all this anger, this hurt."

A huge burden was lifted from her. Sharon let go.

She closes by saying hate is a fact of this world. But so is love. So is justice. Hate is a fire that feeds off its own flames. That night at Mother Emanuel, it erupted in the form of a racist gunman with a semiautomatic weapon who killed nine godly people, including her beloved mother. But

her goodness and love did not die with her. It lives in her. It lives in all of us who turn to God. Love lives in the world, and it can save us from hate.

Such is the story of our Christian faith, from creation and God seeing what He had created and saying it was good; to the Incarnation, God dwelling with us to become one of us to show us how to love one another; to the crucifixion and resurrection when Jesus dies for our sins out of love, to the Mass where we celebrate that time and time again. But we partake in that as well, because all of us have a job to do. To love one another. To forgive. To be a peacemaker. To be participate with Jesus in the defeat of evil, just as Rev. Sharon Risher did.

In the Gospel, disciples of John the Baptist ask if Jesus is the one who is to come, or not. It seems a little odd to ask doesn't it? John seemed pretty certain of his mission. Maybe it wasn't John who had doubts but the disciples of John so John sent them to Jesus to let them see for themselves. Or, maybe John was a little impatient. He could have been hoping Jesus to be more like the prophet Elijah, a man of fire, who would destroy his enemies as Elijah destroyed the prophets of the pagan god Baal. Maybe John is sitting there in prison, thinking about all that is going

wrong in the world with the suffering, the persecution, the godlessness so rampant in Roman society, wondering OK Jesus, when are you going to start burning up the wicked.

Jesus though has a different agenda. What he is doing, namely healing the blind, curing the sick, forgiving people, are reflective of what we hear in the first reading: He comes to save. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Jesus is a little bit ahead of John, pointing not just to judgment, but also to the mercy that comes after judgment. Sometimes we don't like to think about judgment because we'll be judged too; other people might not like to think about mercy because they think it lets the really bad people off the hook. But what mercy does is to never let evil and hate have the last word. This happens when mercy and love trump hate and anger. And Jesus calls us to do what Rev. Sharon did, to defeat evil through love and mercy.

We all know how much evil is in the world based on what we see and experience. And we all know there is not some bygone era when this kind

of thing did not happen. Some people will always choose evil due to free will. But all of us have the power to help people choose the good. We are to leave Mass and our encounters with Jesus and tell the world what we see, namely about the power of good.

As a start, we can think about our faith and grow in it. It sounds obvious, but sometimes we don't think enough about why the Church teaches as She does on the sanctity of unborn life, on capital punishment, on the plights of the poor and the immigrant. All of these issues involve justice and mercy as well, and many Catholics struggle with some of them. Don't ignore what you struggle with; think about it and realize the Church takes these matters seriously because they all entail dignity of the human person, and seeing God in all people.

Second, we have to acknowledge anger. Anger is real; and it has the potential to become a sin but anger can also be justified too. Acts of injustice in the world, or to people we know, should upset us. Sometimes we are deeply hurt; other times we are just angry about something we want to change in terms of laws and our political beliefs. I think Rev. Sharon was quite right in disagreeing with the minister who said forgiveness can be

instantaneous. Not so much for most of us. But anger can also snowball; it can impact other areas of our lives and lead to wrath, or vengeance. But what if we first acknowledged the reality of our feelings, and prayed to work towards letting it go, and worked through what we feel? Or just took a deep breath and calmed down before posting something online, or fighting back? Perhaps we could pray for ourselves, and also for others we are angry at, and ask for God's help to take the first steps, and remind ourselves that God loves all people. Yes there is judgment, but also mercy as Jesus says forgive them, they know not what they do.

Acknowledging our anger about things, we then can work to bring about the kind of world Isaiah talks about both on the macro and micro scale.

With respect to the macro, I'm thinking about how we deal with injustice in the world, and apply our faith to the political sphere in the greater world.

There are people in our parish who actively go to Planned Parenthood to help change hearts and minds, and who have saved lives by helping women to choose life. There are people in our parish who are dedicated to prison ministry and helping people see the incarcerated as actual human beings, while also trying to help them change for the better. There are

people here who go on mission trips to combat poverty, and go to help the homeless at Sharing and Caring Hands. The point is that we as a Christian, when we are angry about things, need to help facilitate changes. It might not result in poverty, abortion or capital punishment or injustice going away, but it will make such a difference in this world by bringing more light into it.

With respect to the micro, all of us are hurt by people, or see people hurt people we love. Most are not to the level that Rev. Sharon experienced with her mother, but we experience the pain of bullies, of gossiping, of intolerance and parents see their kids go through it too. Part of us might really like God to just show up and exact judgment right away on these people. And that's understandable wanting justice. But what if we prayed for those who wronged us or our loved ones, or reached out to talk to those who have hurt us. What if, as Rev. Sharon did, we responded to hate and anger with love? It could be something simple as a positive comment about someone with whom we disagree online, or being the first to extend an olive branch and pick up a phone, or when a person attacks us refraining from fighting fire with fire. Jesus defeats the powers of evil with love and mercy, and we can join with him in doing just that.

This weekend we light the rose colored candle celebrating “Gaudete Sunday” or the Sunday of Joy. As the Advent wreath grows brighter each week signifying the coming of Jesus, and as on the Easter Vigil the sanctuary is filled with the lights of hundreds of candles lit by the light of the Easter Candle, may our souls do the same through how we lead our lives. There will always be another Dylan Roof, and evil happens every day. Jesus though did something about it by showing us the way to ultimately defeat it, so may we follow Him and make the choice to respond to anger and hate with love and mercy, realizing that through our actions we can do so much to truly bring about the Kingdom of God.