

The open wound and the dream of beloved community

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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I grew up in metropolitan Atlanta in the 1960s and 1970s. (I graduated from a high school in south Fulton County in 1975.) Atlanta was, of course, the hometown of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. So, when I was in elementary school, news about his work, about the hopes it inspired, and about the controversies it generated was “local news.” I often heard snippets of his sermons and speeches on television; they lodged in my mind and heart alongside the songs we sang in Sunday School, songs like: “Jesus loves the little children/all the children of the world/Red and Yellow, Black and White/Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

At my church, I learned that “God so loved the *world*” and that Jesus came to show mercy and grace to *everyone*. I heard the story of the Good Samaritan over and over again; its central point made its way into my convictions: there is no one who isn’t my neighbor, and God wants us to love *all* our neighbors. We supported missionaries who worked in Africa. My church leaders and my parents taught me to be polite to the black children and teachers who were part of the elementary school I attended. (I saw later what I was too young and naïve to know then; our schools were integrated because the courts ordered it, not because Christians had learned from Jesus it was right.)

I lived with a lot of dissonance and confusion about race. I could feel the resonance between Dr. King’s dreams and Jesus’ words and actions, but some (not all, thank goodness) of the same people who taught me about the way of Jesus said awful things about King. We took church trips to “Funtown,” an amusement park I learned years later was closed to black people (I am embarrassed that I didn’t notice then). Racist slurs and jokes were part of the world of my childhood and youth, alongside scripture, hymns, and sermons about love.

I couldn’t have put it this way then, but I was caught between the “southern way of life” and the “way of Jesus.” Somehow, the Bible’s message cut through loud and pervasive bigotry. The call of Jesus to live by love rather than fear whispered its way to my heart. For that reason, I’ve been repenting of the sin of racial prejudice for

most of my life, and it shames me when its residual presence in some dark corner of my heart makes itself known. Division among races, made worse by educational and economic inequality, is a wound which remains painfully open, and it's right for me to feel guilty about how ineffective my relatively meager efforts to help heal that wound have been.

This morning, I woke up to the horrific news from Charleston: a white man brutally and senselessly murdered nine African-Americans who were attending a prayer meeting in their church. This hate crime, whatever its sources in the gunman's psyche, linked up with so many other recent incidents where racial prejudice has erupted in violence.

In many ways, American culture is harsh these days. We're mesmerized by the false promises of happiness which money and power make. We're afraid of unpredictable terrorism and of uncertain economic conditions. We're prone to scapegoat those people who are different from us—to blame "the other" for our insecurities. Far too often, we're willing, as in Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan, to "pass by on the other side" and to leave people battered by violence, whether physical or emotional or economic, bleeding in the ditch.

I don't know precisely what can be done, but I do know that we need for people who believe in the rightness of the dream of a beloved, just, and merciful community to speak and act in ways which counter the harshness all around us.

Years ago, I wrote this simple paraphrase of Jesus' Beatitudes. I am praying for wisdom and courage to live in these ways:

Because you are blessed, you are free to acknowledge, without shame, the poverty of your spirit and your need for God; your sadness over your own brokenness and the brokenness of the world; and your need and willingness to be led by God. Because you are blessed, you may, without fear, pursue your hunger and thirst for things to be made right in you and in the world. You may, without hesitation, show kindness and compassion toward the guilty, the struggling, the marginalized, and the excluded. God will become the single aim and the dominant passion of your life, and it will become your nature to risk those things which make for peace. Even when your commitment to God's kingdom is costly, joy will fill your soul.

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