

I flinched at their forgiveness

By [Martha Spong](#)

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When I first heard they forgave him, I flinched. Why should they have to do that? So quickly?

My visceral response gave way to self-examination. Maybe, like the Amish families who lost their children to a shooter a few years ago, these families are better Christians than I am, with a deeper faith, a less questioning theology, a more profound relationship with God.

I came this.close. to writing something about it. Then I started reading blog posts and essays like this one by [my friend Denise Anderson at her blog](#), and [this one by Candice Benbow at Ebony](#), and [this one, a great conversation at The Toast](#). They provided a different, and needed, perspective on what it means to be Christian when you are part of a minority and oppressed culture. If you only read one, read this one [by Kiese Laymon about talking to his grandmother, at The Guardian](#). Then come back.

Ready? Okay.

I've been linking on Facebook to these essays and blog posts by African-Americans on the subject of shame and forgiveness and the trap created for the Black church simply by the attempt to survive in a majority white world. Wherever I read the ensuing conversations, the majority white participants, and particularly the Christian ones, resist the idea that there is anything multi-layered about the forgiveness offered by the families of the victims of the massacre in Charleston last week. They remind me that forgiveness is about letting go of things so you won't be burdened by them, a psycho-spiritual approach popularized by Lewis Smedes in his book "Forgive and Forget," a book I have recommended and handed along to many people.

One of the things on my mind is how disconnected our experiences as white people can be from those of others. I think it's harder to ask people to apply that to massive, longstanding cultural wrongs.

And for white liberals of a certain age, this is a horrible time of reckoning as they – well, honestly, we – realize the dreams we had for a better more equal world, and the work they or their parents did in the 1950s and 60s was a drop in the bucket. I'm a little younger and better in tune with wider conversations about race, yet I am still having to tell the voice in my head that says "But really, things are better!" to shut up.

It's not just that there is still a ways to go. It's that we congratulated ourselves for making the three-point turn to get out of the driveway and never went further, and now we've backed down the street into eroding the Voting Rights Act and allowing police brutality instead of putting the car in Drive and actually making a difference.

We have been in denial, and especially for those of us who came up through religious communities, and maybe even had relationships with churches of not primarily the same racial makeup, or glad-handed or even genuinely welcomed the non-white visitors who stopped into our churches, we're finally looking at how much more needs to be done. It's uncomfortable, and we resist it, and we can't figure out how to be allies and thought we already were. No excuses, just noting that there is a lot of reckoning occurring here.

I hate like hell that it took a shooting in a church to bring us to this moment – both because I hate that it happened in a church, and because I hate that putting the spotlight on "respectable" victims makes it more likely that white people will have to face the truth. It seems like we have had plenty of chances already.

And this is not the problem of our friends in the Black church or in the more secular anti-racism movement. This is **our** problem. We need to listen and hear the truth and figure out how we are going to help make the change. We are complicit in it, and we need to suck up our disappointment, listen to other people's stories, and stop telling them they are wrong about the White church simply because we've never seen anyone be discriminatory or spoken or heard anything terrible from our own pulpits.

I don't want to hear that I am forgiven for these things; I flinch at the notion, although I need forgiveness for the ways I am part of the problem.

Let me, let us, sort that out with God. And Lord, my Lord, help me to see the ways I can make a difference.

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