In black Charleston, a struggle to find both justice and mercy

by Patrik Jonsson in the February 15, 2017 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Charleston variety store owner Leon Fields pondered the question of whether Dylann Roof should die for his unthinkable crimes or have his life spared as an act of grace.

Fields has witnessed all sorts of senseless violence in his neighborhood. Thoughts of vengeance, forgiveness, and God's judgment aren't theoretical here, but viscerally real, said the African-American businessman.

"I remember when my sister was murdered," Fields said. "I wished ill on a lot of people, but then found myself feeling sorry for them when life got the better of them."

His range of thoughts is part of what Fields summarizes as the deeply "mixed emotions" in Charleston's black community, which was attacked in its most sacred space on June 17, 2015, when Roof killed nine people ranging from 26 to 89 years old at a Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Ethel Lance, one of those murdered that day, was a frequent customer at Fields's shop. She was a dynamo church lady, he said, always running from one errand to the next, often on behalf of Mother Emanuel.

A jury convicted Roof and sentenced him in January to be executed—a decision the majority of white Charlestonians agreed with. Yet many in the city's black community—including many of the victims' family members—took a different view. They called for mercy and challenged the idea that forgiveness excuses white supremacist behavior and downplays black humanity.

"I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul," Nadine Collier, the daughter of victim Ethel Lance, told Roof in a courtroom statement. "You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you."

Despite his sense that Roof needs to pay the ultimate price for his crime, Fields worries that killing the young white supremacist could make him a martyr. He

shudders at the thought, mulling over the question of whether compassion can, in fact, lead to grace and perhaps to meaningful change.

At the very least, he said, the families of the Emanuel Nine “lit a lamp for us to follow.”

To Sam Holmes, a Charleston-born Vietnam veteran, Roof’s hatred is a reminder that the past—when white Charlestonians feared that slaves would rise up and overthrow them—still lingers.

“Listen, humanity is in bad shape, and it’s not just an American problem but a world problem,” Holmes said. “Forgiveness in this way is a way of making things better. To have him live and allow him the time to change his mind” allows both punishment and redemption.

Leaders of the 201-year-old national AME denomination had urged the jury to spare Roof’s life.

“There lingers the unmistakable need for this nation to move beyond guilt or shame about racial injustice in America to action that will eradicate its consequences and its genesis from our hearts,” Bishop Frank Reid III said in a statement. “That means being open for a cure from unbearable pain, and willingness to bind our wounds to forgive offenders and offer a second chance.”

To be sure, the push to forgive Roof—who has remained unrepentant and voiced irritation during the trial at having to listen to so much testimony on behalf of his victims—is complex and far from unanimous.

During a break in the court proceedings, Esther Lance, who is also Ethel Lance’s daughter, noted that she hasn’t spoken to her sister, Nadine Collier, for nearly a year, even though they’ve both been in the same courtroom. The divide is over Collier’s willingness to forgive their mother’s killer.

“If [Roof] lives, his momma and daddy get to come see him,” says Esther Lance. “I can’t ever see my momma again. The last time I saw her she said, ‘I’ll come back tonight to kiss the grands.’ But she never came back, and we’ll never see her again.”

Mark Tyler, the senior pastor of Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, noted some additional facets in that struggle with forgiveness.

“It’s fair to say that what makes this even more difficult is that it occurred in a place we consider sacred and holy, and among people who actually were doing what the church is intended to do, who welcomed a stranger who in turn took advantage of their kindness in the worst possible way,” Tyler said. “Every person who does something has to understand that even if God forgives you, there is still a certain set of consequences that you unleash because of the thing that you’ve done.”

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