Forgiveness after the tragedy in Charleston

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NCR Today

Like most of the nation, I was shocked and horrified by the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., last week. The cold-blooded killing of nine people. The apparently racist motive of the shooter. The deep sadness in the community.

But then came a development that moved me to tears. Within 24 hours of the killings, some of the family members of the victims said that they forgave the shooter. Yes, forgave him.

According to reporting in The Atlantic, the daughter of one victim said, "I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you."

The sister of another victim said, "We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

This act was committed against African-American people who have suffered from racism their whole lives and who undoubtedly realized, or at least suspected, that the shooter in this case is alleged to be a young white man with strongly racist affiliations. So remarkable were their expressions of forgiveness that President Barack Obama himself called them "an expression of faith that is unimaginable but that reflects the goodness of the American people."

The only comparable expression of forgiveness in public events in the United States in recent years came after the shooting deaths of five Amish girls in a schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pa., in 2006. Relatives of the Amish victims forgave the murderer, who had taken his own life. And the Amish edified the nation with their willingness to forgive.

And the same is true of Charleston. The families of the victims there have edified the nation. They speak
in the best traditions of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, which has a long history of struggling nonviolently for racial justice that stretches back to the days of slavery. Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke there, and his spirit obviously lives on.

Forgiveness is essential for healing in a community and a nation. But more than that: It is central to the Christian message. After all, Jesus on the cross forgave those who were killing him.

That must be quite a church in Charleston. "Mother Emanuel," they call it. Whatever the worship there, it is a place where the Gospel lives.

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