OPINION

A moment of hesitation

RYAN CRAIG

—

Home Cookin'

In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.

Psalm 18:6

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His plan had been in place for about six months. He was going to kill people. He was going to kill people in the name of hate and in hate he would bring his cause to the forefront.

Dylan Storm Roof did just that when he shot people in worship. He brought his cause — racism, hate for the sake of skin and a cry for those to rally around him to start a race war — along with a gun he had in a fanny pack around his waist as he walked into the Emanuel AMC Church in Charleston, S.C., on a Wednesday night, a night of Bible study.

He sat for nearly an hour, became upset at some of the Scriptures the group discussed, then he stood up, spat some racial epithets and started shooting the people in the House of God.

Roof reloaded his gun an estimated five times and shot at close range multiple times. Death, it seemed, was not enough. He had to throw as many bullets as he could into those he sought to destroy, as if the shots would reverberate in the rafters and sound the call for the race war he wanted so desperately.

There were 13 souls in that room. Nine of the worshippers — six women, three men all African-American — lay dead or dying. Three survived, two (an elderly woman and a child) because they played dead; another was kept alive by Roof so she could tell what he did once he had committed suicide as planned.

The last soul in that church basement was Dylan Storm Roof. He had heard the word. He had heard of forgiveness. Roof, after he was caught (his promise of suicide unfulfilled), told investigators he hesitated to bring darkness into the room when he thought about how nice those in the Bible study had been to him.

He hesitated.

Whether or not you have faith like that of those who were in that Bible study, you have to wonder why a man so filled with hate — who is alleged to have said during his rampage, "I have to do it. You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go," and then, "Y'all want something to pray about? I'll give you something to pray about." — why that man would have ever hesitated at all.

But, to God, to the nation that retched at his crime, to those he sought to rally, Roof brought not fear, a river of hate and the annihilation of those with dark skin — he, instead, brought change.

Roof, filled with his ideas that should see no resurrection in this or any future century, may have also killed some of the last remnants of the old South. He might have brought down a Confederate flag from a state capitol and untold statues and flags from government grounds. He might have shaken a nation so hard that it stopped and looked at itself and asked why things aren't better.

Why, nearly 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, is racism still not a relic of another time? Also, why are the ghosts of 150 years ago still floating among us all? No one, it seemed, could have predicted the consensus of almost all we elected to remove symbols of the Confederate States to curation in a museum.

Roof hesitated, but I wonder if he would have weighed the lives of those in the room, took the word of peace and love much more seriously if he had known all he had stood for would crack, maybe one day soon crumble, because he embraced darkness when light — salvation from the poison from within — was already trying to work inside him and in those around him?

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1:22

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As a young man I would sometimes attend the annual banquet the Todd County Gideons would hold. My Dad is a Gideon, a great public speaker, who often would tell me stories about how Gideon Bibles put in the right hands or placed in the right spot have saved lives.

Often the Gideon banquets were held in the fellowship hall of Petrie Memorial UMC and a couple of times they would ask me to sing so I would have to sit through the entire program instead of sneaking outside and playing. Like most kids, I tried to not be bored with the keynote speaker, so I attempted to listen and I'm glad I did. Each speaker, in different ways, showed how that just by one opening up to the possibility of the word, then lives could be changed.

There was one speaker who was a criminal of the highest order — attempted murder, drugs, and organized crime through biker gangs — and a Bible passed to him in prison changed his heart. He did what it said to do and brought love inside him and, now released from prison, he goes back inside to minister to those who were once like him.

Another speaker at a later banquet told how he had gone to a hotel room and was preparing to attempt suicide. His life was in shambles. Because of alcohol and drug addiction he had lost or ran off everyone he loved or ever loved him and he was in the room to end his life. He saw a Gideon Bible, picked it up, read some of the words about love and forgiveness and did what the Bible said. He now speaks to others about the words.

You can be the staunchest Baptist, Methodist or Catholic on the planet; you can believe in Buddha, Muhammad, or the ghosts in the trees; you can believe in nothing — that we are a cosmic accident with evolutionary malfunctions that make us have faith in something that can't be seen; but, sometimes just by being presented with the love inside someone can cause all sort of change.

That, to me anyway, is what is truly in the balance in the moments when the path to faith presents itself while darkness blankets the landscape.

I grow tired of those who would say we should go against our programming and seek no religion, be no person of faith, because it makes no sense to believe in fairy tales, old folklore or ancient superstitions.

I know that love, past what we can all carry, was in the room with Dylan Roof the night he shot believers. I know they had to be so afraid when evil came, but I also know those who died in that room did not deceive themselves and showed kindness to the strange man in their midst even as he struggled with if he was to murder them all.

Just today I read an article about a scientist (albeit one who was trying to sell books) who came out and said it was foolish to believe in God. It was foolish for people to respect "a person of faith" since when it comes to science and the natural world faith is the "failure of religion to find out the truth about anything."

The scientist, who makes good points about people who let children die because their "religion" doesn't allow them to have cancer treated or politicians who grasp the Bible and say global warming is a "hoax," does not get the real point of faith.

(Another column for another time is the dumbing-down of America to the point where we believe ill-educated pundits over scientists just because many of faith can't grasp an idea or finding which might test their faith.)

The scientist shouldn't believe in faith since he thinks the idea of God is foolish, but even after reading about the scientist's argument I asked myself, why did Dylan Roof hesitate?

Was it just the stimuli of kindness causing his brain to feel sympathy for people he was supposed to hate? Was it just a chemical reaction in his brain? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Like the scripture says, faith, and the reasons that so many of the world still believe in a creator while shaking our fists at the cosmos and rail against the idea that we are not an evolutionary accident, does not make things easy, it makes them possible.

A belief in things hoped for and evidence of a paradise unseen can be awful hard to quantify for anyone or any scientist.

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Luke 21:36 (NRSV)

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I've been covering crime for nearly two decades. I've seen enough death, enough autopsy photos and enough heartache to know a truly heinous crime when I'm presented with one.

A couple weeks ago there was a home invasion in the place we call home. An elderly Mennonite man was bound and beaten to death for money. His wife, according to what a source told the Standard, was also bound but wasn't beaten at first.

She was feeble from a recent surgery. This woman of faith, presented with her husband being beaten to death, did the thing a woman of faith does — she started to sing hymns and she started to pray.

While I don't know this for sure, I have to think there had to be a moment of hesitation inside her attacker or attackers. I have to think, I need to think, that the first thing that raced through the murderous assailant's mind would not be to strike her as hard as possible as soon as she asks for God's help.

Maybe, especially, the attacker hit her because she asked for God's help. Still, my mind comes back to what it takes to hit an elderly man until he dies, what it takes to hit an elderly woman until her face needs reconstructive surgery.

Even after the first, second, third or further kicks and or punches or strikes, was there a moment of hesitation? Or was the plan to leave both of the good people to die?

As the scripture says, we should all be alert at all times, and to hope (and pray, if you are so inclined) to have the strength to escape the horrible things taking place.

Because while there are miracles out there — like, the Gideon speakers —there are also many, many more in this old world that have hesitation, see the evil in their actions, and decide to jump, headfirst with eyes open wide, into the darkness.

As the scripture says, "When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers."

May the terror for evildoers like Dylan Roof and those who would murder a 79-year-old man and nearly beat his wife to death, first and foremost, be the realization that, at some point, they had a moment of hesitation for a reason.

And they should have listened.

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