Growing up in a downtown church, Tom’s daughter frequently encountered people that those around her referred to as “down on their luck” and “unfortunate”. Yet despite the fact that others around her would admonish she stay away from “those people”, her father Tom never did. Tom always stopped and spoke to anyone who approached him even though others would usher his daughter away. Sometimes from a distance she would notice that her father would hand the person some money. If she asked him about “What happened?” He’d shrug and say something like: “Oh he just needed a cup of coffee” or “She needed help paying a bill” and that would be the end of it. It wasn’t until after Tom died that the daughter learned the full story.

In his condolence letter The Reverend Dan Mathews, then Rector of Trinity Parish in New York City, told her the story that her father Tom had told him about her grandmother Blanche and her powerful influence on him. Tom had grown up in the midst of the depression in a small town in Pennsylvania. While times were hard for his family, they were blessed by the fact that his father was able to continue to bring home money on a fairly regular basis. As was common during that time, many people would ride the trains from town to town looking for work or at least a meal. Since Tom’s family home was near the tracks many of those riding through would come to his house looking for food. His mother Blanche would always feed them. And so, their house bore a mark on the doorpost, a mark left by those who had received food at that home, a mark commonly referred to as a hobo mark.

Well, that mark infuriated Tom. He did not want all those strangers coming to his house and receiving food. He didn’t want his mother spending all that time and all that food on strangers. So he would go out every night and wash the mark off the doorpost. But no matter how many times he would wash it away, another person would replace it with a fresh mark. Despite his efforts the people still came and his mother still fed them. Finally, one day Tom suddenly saw that mark for what it truly was, a mark of blessedness.

Because his family had been blessed, they shared their blessing with others. And in sharing with others his family was blessed by those they welcomed. For Tom, that realization changed his life. But that change did not come easily or readily for Tom. Before he could really change, young Tom had to confront his own prejudice, and admit his own sense of self righteousness. For this new perspective, Tom had to really see others as the neighbor he knew he was supposed to love as he loved himself. Once he did this, he understood that instead of that hobo mark being a mark to hide, it was a mark of pride.

For Tom that realization changed his life. And that image became the major focus of his work in the church as an adult. Over and over again, as he addressed various groups in the city, in the diocese, and even in other dioceses, he would challenge his listeners to figure out how they would leave their mark in their community.

Our lessons today challenge our perceptions of other people, and of situations. Youthful David defies appearances, and even as the giant of a warrior Goliath taunts him, David trusts that God will deliver him safely through the battle. The disciples are overwhelmed by a sudden storm at sea, and demand to drowsy Jesus: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Today, their question may be on the lips of many in this nation, as we gather stunned and heart sick over the events at Emmanuel AME Church this week. The shooting of 9 faithful followers of Christ as they prayed and studied the Bible, welcoming a stranger in their midst defies all understanding, as he returned their welcome with deliberate and deadly gunfire. While many want to point fingers outward towards this group or that group, it is past time for each of us to take a hard look at ourselves.
When do each of us bristle thinking that someone is getting something we should have, just like Tom not wanting the family food handed out? How do each of us label another by appearance, by work or lack thereof, by race, by gender, by faith? Who do we work to keep away from our family, our neighborhood, our circle of friends? How quickly do we repeat stories about another in order to disparage them to others at work, to friends, or in our community? Where do our cherished points of view take precedence over the person in true need? How have we played backroom politics to promote our agenda even at the high price of wounding another person?

If we say we are “free from prejudice” we are not being truthful with our selves, and certainly not with God. While some here may be free from the sin of racism, many of us grew up in a world where racism was common. Even if we have worked to avoid racist thinking, where has our silence in a situation enabled racism to continue? All of us have some type or category of person with whom we struggle to be around. It may be those who are outspoken; it may be those who are obese or those who are too thin; it may be those who are prone to complain; or it may be those of the opposing political party. When we are unblinkingly honest, we can confess those biases to ourselves and to our God, who is ever forgiving.

I confess that when I first saw the picture of the shooter captured I was struck by how much he looked like me. Dirty blonde hair and blue-eyed, I would have welcomed him in my home as one of us. That is the type of unflinching honesty with which I am beginning my own personal inventory of biases and prejudices. Today I am fervently praying that each of us will make such an honest inventory.

Peace! Jesus commands in today’s Gospel to the sea relentlessly tossing the boat filled with his followers. Peace is what we plead for today. Peace in the Hebraic understanding of Shalom is a peace that includes wholeness and the sense of well being. Shalom presupposes justice and then welfare not only for the individual but also for the whole community. The peace Jesus offers is for all who choose to love him and not just a select few. Shalom means the victory of God’s purpose. And we as the disciples are invited to share in this Shalom. It is God’s gift to us freely given and we are free to accept or reject it. Once we accept it we are charged as the disciples to give this gift to others as it has been given to us – freely.

Shalom was surely at hand when the families of the murdered victims spoke words of forgiveness to the suspect at his arraignment. Words of forgiveness less than 48 hours after losing cherished family members is nothing short of God’s Kingdom at work through these amazing witnesses of God’s true peace. Clearly, these words of forgiveness were not said with the belief that the family members would forget or get over their devastating losses. Please note those words of forgiveness also included a call for the shooter to repent. Still these words of forgiveness were spoken from the heart, with an understanding and a trust that God is still in charge and God will be the ultimate judge.

So today in Ooltewah, Tennessee how can we embrace and show the Shalom the true peace that our Lord calls for in the midst of the tempest? What will be our mark in this community so that all who pass know this is a place of welcome? How can we live so that all who enter this space know that the divine language of peace and of genuine love is spoken here? In the portion of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians we heard today, we learned that being faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ is not without hardship, calamities, and even violence. In the midst of the challenges Paul reminds us open wide your hearts. My brothers and sisters in Christ: Let us do just that open wide our hearts and live as the instruments of God’s Peace that we pray to be.
A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.