Here we are, to mourn and lament, to reflect and to pray in response to yet one more massacre of the innocents. So like the children of Newtown in their innocence, these were different, adults who knew the cost of discipleship and the need for justice. People of color who knew that the African-American experience is one marked by mourning, they paid the price of their open-hearted welcome. Reverend Pinckney’s prayer may seem ironic, even naïve, in the face of what happened at that bible study group, but I wager that with the same hindsight he would not change a word.

So how and for whom do we mourn? The readings from the psalms and the Letter to the Romans insist on hope in the midst of all that should rightly lead to despair. The psalmist is “brought very low” and begs for God’s deliverance, living at once in suffering and in hope. Paul’s words surely resonate with the bereaved of Charleston—“For thy sake we are being killed… as sheep to be slaughtered,” and yet “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” There is no way to explain this hope, any more than we can explain the capacity to forgive the murderer that so many of the bereaved have shown. To some this is folly, to others the grace of God. We too mourn for those who died, though we did not know them though we wish we had, we stand in solidarity with those who grieve, even as we learn from them. And we surely must mourn for our country in which such things can happen.

As we mourn, we also reflect on the events that one commentator has rightly called “a peculiarly American tragedy.” Some will call this a hate crime, and it surely
was, but we also need to see it as an act of terrorism. In the years since 9/11, self-styled radical Islamist have been responsible for an average of 6 acts of terror a year, with a total loss of life of 50 people. Right-wing extremists have committed an average of 337 attacks per year, with a total of 254 people dead. Which acts of terror do we remember, and why? White Americans in particular are not directly affected by these “hate crimes,” but perhaps they need to see them as a war of terror on the African-American population, and look into their own hearts for the resources for a war on this war of terror.

Today we are here most of all to pray. But for what and how? Of course we pray for the dead and especially for those who mourn their close friends and relatives. We pray too for the people of Charleston, horrified and humiliated. We pray especially with and for our African-American brothers and sisters as they once again confront their own history of mourning as victims of violence. We pray that those who are not African-American will understand that this history is American history, that it is our history. And how do we pray? All in our own way, but let me suggest that we might also recognize the truth of Simone Weil’s observation that “absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” Our challenge as individuals, as a Fairfield community and as one nation under God is to give “absolutely unmixed attention” to the tragedy of Charleston and all such events. Indifference and inattention on the part of the many are as responsible for these tragedies as the evil in the hearts of the few. May God grant us the gift of the prayer of unmixed attention.