

Sermon: The Heart of the Matter
Text: II Corinthians 5:16-21
Date: August 13, 2017
Context: WWPC
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All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation . . .

II Corinthians 5:18

What is that famous Chinese blessing? The one that's really a curse? *May you live in interesting times.*

On Tuesday of this week it felt less like we were living in interesting times, and more like we'd reached a low point, if not a crisis point, in recent American history.

As I suspect every person in this room knows, Tuesday is the day the president threatened to rain down "fire and fury" on North Korea if their president continued to provoke him.

Many of us, perhaps all of us, waited on pins and needles to see if a man who has become known for issuing empty threats might finally follow through on one of them.

Given the stakes, we worried that this time the president might do what he said and launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike on North Korea, a country governed by a madman, who also happens to have his own cache of nuclear weapons at his disposal.

So far the president has not followed through on his threat. And thank God for that. But as every person in this room also knows, the anxiety we all felt about this steadily escalating nuclear standoff was not the last of the troubling news to emerge from this dark and dismal week.

Yesterday it felt like we'd reached another low point, another crisis point, perhaps even a turning point, in American history.

A very dear friend of mine lives in Charlottesville. As I was sitting in my office at home, working on this sermon, he texted me a video of an incident in which a man who is believed to be a white nationalist drove his car at speed into a group of anti-racist protestors, fatally injuring one person and seriously injuring some twenty others.

What happened in Charlottesville was not 9/11. But there is no other word to describe this heinous crime of driving a car at high speed into a group of innocent pedestrians. It was a terrorist attack. This time it was home grown, but it shares the same origins as the 9/11 attacks: a poisonous, extremist, fundamentalist ideology, rooted in hate and fear.

Which is to say, it's been a week from hell. A week that shook our souls. A week that shook our faith in America. A week that perhaps shook our faith in the future of this great country. A week that perhaps shook our faith in God,

That's the hard news, and it's very hard news indeed. And I don't intend to minimize it for a moment.

But it's not the only news. Every Sunday for the last two thousand years, congregations have gathered for worship, to have their faith strengthened and renewed so that they can go out in the world and do what Jesus commanded us all to do: to love God, our neighbors and our selves, and even our enemies.

And on all of these Sundays pastors have stepped into their pulpits to proclaim the good news of the gospel: that God has come to reconcile the world to God's own self, and all the people in it to one another.

This has been true regardless of what has been going on in the world around us, because the truth of the gospel is not contingent on what's going on in the world around us.

It was true on the Sunday after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. It was true after an assassin delivered a fatal shot on President Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963. It was true after another assassin delivered a fatal shot on Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4th, 1968.

And it was true after a band of deranged terrorists flew passenger jets into the World Trade Center, on September 11th, 2001.

And we're going to do that again today, on August 13th, 2017. We've gathered here for worship, and to hear the good news of the Gospel, to have our faith strengthened and renewed, and to be re-energized for the work God calls us to do.

So let's dive right into it.

The good news is, one, that we are people of faith. Our hope for peace in the world is not ultimately constrained or limited by what our eyes can see.

We don't deny what we can see. We won't ever ignore violence when it happens right before our eyes. But our hopes for the world are not limited by it.

Two, the United States is not the first country in the history of the world to confront the kinds of violence and anger, and even hate, that we're currently experiencing. It's not even the first time in our own history that people of faith and conscience have had to confront these toxic forces head on.

When my friend texted me the link to that video, I responded, *Dear Lord, it's like we're back in Birmingham in 1963, or in Johannesburg in 1987.*

But peace and love and justice triumphed over evil then. Even through the darkest and most violent episodes in the struggle for civil rights, peace and love and justice triumphed.

And even over the darkest and most violent impulses of apartheid, peace and love and justice again triumphed over evil in South Africa.

And they will triumph again here in the United States. I feel confident in saying this because once again, thousands of people of faith and conscience are right in the middle of this struggle, waging hope, making peace, and incarnating God's love.

A perfect picture of what that looks like emerged from yesterday's rally. Did you see the photo of all the clergy folk and church folk and other folks standing arm in arm, literally facing down men dressed in camouflage and brandishing assault rifles?

I'm sure there were people from a variety of faith and ethical traditions standing in that line.

But on the Christian side, they were, and we are, a people of a particular kind of faith: a faith that has peace at its heart and that's built around the idea of reconciliation.

Reconciliation between a loving God and a broken humanity. Reconciliation between hostile factions of all kinds. Between hostile races, hostile religions and hostile neighbors -- neighbors next door and neighbors across the globe.

But this belief that God and God's people are actively involved in the ministry of reconciliation, this, too, sometimes requires that we view reality through the eye of faith.

And this has always been so.

In the first century, more than a few residents of rural Judea saw Jesus as a political and military messiah. That's why they cheered for him. That's why they shouted their hosannas when he finally rode into Jerusalem on the back of that famous donkey. Because they wanted their country back, and they thought he had come to give it to them.

It's also why they turned on him so quickly. Because to most residents of Jerusalem, he seemed uninterested in driving the Roman overlords from the capital, and from their homelands.

And so where just a week earlier they were ready to anoint him as their Messiah, now they shouted for him to be crucified like a common criminal.

The onlookers in Jerusalem made a fundamental mistake that day. To use language Paul gives us in our passage for today, they viewed Christ through human eyes, and not through the eyes of faith.

It's not that Jesus' mission was less than what they'd hoped for. Not that it was other than what they'd hoped for.

It's just that it was more than that. It was about instituting God's reign, and God's shalom -- a domain where peace is the dominant ethic, where non-violence is the rule of the day, where love is the law of the land, and justice and mercy are available to everyone.

And reconciliation, not violence, is at the heart of that mission. It's the foundation of that Kingdom, of that reign.

The Apostle Paul understood the truth of this mission, God's mission, of reconciliation.

As one biblical scholar put it: *In his two letters to the church in Corinth, Paul addresses a notoriously contentious community, which frequently divided its people by class, ethnicity, and the perceived value of their spiritual giftedness. They even infamously divided people out at the Eucharist. In response, Paul urges those believers to engage in a "ministry of reconciliation"* (Keith Anderson, onscripture.com, March 6, 2016).

So what does this ministry look like in the real world? We've caught a glimpse of that this summer.

As most of you know, since June we've been exploring stories in the book of Acts that highlight what happened after Jesus took his leave from the world's stage.

We've seen how the disciples suddenly had to institute the teachings of Jesus. How they had to operationalize the boundary-breaking love he taught, the boundary-breaking love he embodied.

And we've seen how they had to engage in this ministry of reconciliation.

We saw it when a voice from God instructed Phillip to baptize an Ethiopian eunuch--a man different in every respect from the members of Phillip's own community. Of a different race, a different, indeterminate gender, a different religion.

You sure about this God? I'm sure. Baptize him.

We saw it when, again, a voice from God instructed Ananias to lay hands on and pray for Saul of Tarsus, a man who had violently persecuted the followers of Jesus.

You sure God? I'm sure. Do as your told. Go and pray for him.

But if that makes this ministry seem easy, or simple, it's not.

Last week in my sermon, we took a little imaginative journey to West Virginia. This was shortly after a large political rally in Huntington, where the people were once again heard to join in chants of "Lock her up!", and where they cheered when they were incited not to believe in the "fake news."

What would have happened, I wondered, if I been in West Virginia at that time, and had somehow encountered a man who had just come from that rally. He was out camping near a river, and I was just getting off that river after a day of paddling.

And right then I hear a voice that says, *Baptize him.*

Do I do it? As I said last week, I honestly don't know. Today, I want to take a moment to explain my ambivalence, to elaborate briefly on why I can't immediately answer that question.

To do this let me shift this scene just a bit. Let's now say I happened to encounter this man on his way home from that rally yesterday in Charlottesville.

Again, let's say he was out camping near a river. Only this time when I met him I saw that his truck was parked nearby. I noticed that it had a pair of flags flying from poles in the back--one a Confederate flag, the other emblazoned with big black swastika.

Do I do it? Do I heed the voice telling me to baptize this man? Heaven knows he needs to be washed clean. But part of whether that happens doesn't just depend on me. It also depends on him.

Mind you, I don't care if he is ready to profess belief in all the foundational doctrines of the church--the Virgin birth, the Trinity, and so on.

Jesus did not ask his disciples to profess specific doctrinal beliefs when he called them to follow him. He just made it clear that to be his followers they had to love one another. If that was good enough for him, it's good enough for me.

So in a case like this — baptizing someone who is energized by hate and racism, a man who celebrates the horrors of slavery, who chants Nazi slogans and waves Nazi salutes--in a case like this, the act of baptism would first have to be preceded by an invitation to repent and to turn from such hateful ways, to renounce a set of values and behaviors and beliefs diametrically at odds with everything Jesus taught and preached during his ministry.

Do I do it? If this man is ready to burn those flags in his campfire and turn from his hateful ways, then, yes, absolutely let's go down into those waters so that he can come up fresh and clean and born anew.

But when it comes to the ministry of reconciliation, there is one last factor to consider. Sometimes this ministry has to start with us. Sometimes it has to start with me.

Yesterday, after the news from the protest began to break, I wrote on Facebook that part of me wanted to get in my car, drive to Charlottesville and point and shoot pepper spray in the faces of people who dare to appear in public, in the United States of America, and raise Nazi salutes and chant Nazi slogans.

I noted that we fought white supremacy in Gettysburg and Antietam. American troops fought it again on the beach at Normandy and in the fields of Italy and France and Germany.

And guess what? It lost. My dad fought it in Europe, and I was ready yesterday and I'm still ready today to fight it here and now.

People of faith and conscience fought racism and white supremacy again in Selma and Birmingham and Detroit and Watts, and sometimes it seems like we'll be fighting these demonic forces for the rest of our lives.

And that makes me sad and angry and I can feel the impulse to return hate with hate bubbling up in my blood. Which is to say, I can feel the impulse to channel my own inner Nazi and to give into these demonic forces myself.

Which is when I realized I was on the cusp of becoming divided from what I most deeply believe, from the truth of what Jesus lived and taught, the truth of that Dr. King lived and taught: That you cannot drive out hate with hate. Only love can do that.

So in the end I decided not to get in my car and drive to Virginia, and to leave the pepper spray untouched on the shelf of the store.

Instead I decided that I will stand in solidarity with peaceful protesters everywhere, from Birmingham, to Johannesburg, to Charlottesville.

Wherever hate raises its ugly head, I will stand with people of faith and conscience who are meeting hate with love.

I will stand with people who, when confronted by bearded men bearing assault weapons, and chanting Nazi slogans, link their arms together and begin to sing *This Little Light of Mine*.

And because I could not be with them in that line yesterday, I decided that I will find a way to spread this love where I live today. I'll begin by taking Anne Lamott's advice and listen for the sound of birds.

And maybe I'll give twenty dollars to a panhandler on the street, or buy him a sandwich or a piece of pie--and I'll do this even if he's wearing a tee-shirt emblazoned with the Confederate flag on the front, because he's my neighbor and I'm commanded to love him. Because he's a child of God and he deserves no less.

And if I see a young African American boy today, maybe I'll tell him that his life matters not just to me but that it matters to everyone, because it matters to God.

And so today and every day I will stand on the side of love, because starting from the moment Jesus walked out of that love-busted tomb, on that bright Easter morning after the darkest three days of his followers' lives -- ever since that day, in the end, love always wins.

Amen