

Some Reflections on Charlottesville
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Pentecost 12

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

I wonder how much our lives are really influenced or molded by the words and stories we find in scripture.

When I first decided to go to seminary it was not because I thought that I could become a priest because at that time I was living in England where women were not yet being ordained. I wanted to go to seminary because there were some words of Jesus that sounded so strange, so opposed to everything I had learned about surviving in this world that I wanted the opportunity to delve into scripture deeply enough to understand how these words might become real in my life. From the gospel of Matthew: "You have heard it said, "you must love your neighbors and hate your enemies but I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matth. 5:43 or from Luke, "But I say this to those who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly." Luke 6:27-28

I grew up with parents who had lived through world war II and the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Germany under the influence of Hitler. I believed and still believe that Europe was saved from a horrific end because of the brave men and women who joined together to resist and defeat the evil power of the Nazi's and other fascist regimes. **And** I have to reconcile that belief with the words of Jesus. I have to understand what Jesus might have meant when he called on me to love my enemy while at the same time preventing them from perpetrating evil.

Over many years of working with these words of Jesus I have come to think that first we must do everything in our power to prevent those who love evil from gaining power in our societies in the first place. We must vote, speak openly and honestly with our neighbors, contact our legally elected representatives, and perhaps resort to protesting or even peaceful civil disobedience in order to resist those who seek in any way to destroy God's kingdom of compassion and caring love that respects the dignity, humanity and freedom of all people. And I think that most people who saw what happened when the Nazis and White Supremacists took over in Germany in the last century would say the same. When we see someone harming or oppressing or de-humanizing another person, we have a responsibility to prevent this harm in any way that we can. But preventing harm is not enough. We must also try to understand why perpetrators have been led into such terrible beliefs and acts.

For many years I've been asking myself what does Jesus mean when he commands his followers – including me – to "Love your enemies." How do we do this in real life? Do we simply pretend that there are no consequences for hurtful or destructive actions – no personal responsibility. I don't think that Jesus can be saying this. At the same time, do I simply disregard the humanity of someone who has done wrong, destructive, hurtful things – do they simply become one of "those people?" – a gang member or drug taker or some other label that describes their misdeeds – but not their humanity?

I believe that many young men and women who join gangs do so out of a need to find a place of belonging. They begin to commit sometimes terrible crimes in order to become accepted and prove their loyalty to their gang family. Of course, we must try to stop the destruction and harm they may cause. And they must face the consequences of any actions they have taken – innocent people must be protected from any harm that they might perpetrate – which might mean removing them from society for some time. But do we also have any responsibility as Christians to continue to treat them with dignity and respect – to recognize their basic humanity? Do we have some responsibility to help them search for a new place to belong, a place to begin to forge a new identity? What does it mean for us to love those who are considered society's enemies? Must we consign them to a life of perpetual punishment or should we use incarceration as a time when we can do everything we can to offer opportunities for rehabilitation and restoration with the hope that each person might find a more productive, hopeful – even compassionate life?? When they have served their time and are released from prison should we prevent them finding meaningful employment or should we do everything we can to help them find employment and a different environment to go home to? ****What does it mean to love our enemies?

I was really interested in something I heard this past week. A young man who was a former white supremacist was commenting on what happened in Charlottesville. In his own words, Derek Black said, "I was born into a prominent white supremacist – David Duke was my godfather, and my dad started Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website – and I was once considered the bright future of the movement." But despite having espoused deeply racist and anti-Semitic views his entire life his views changed when he went to college. He met a young Jewish boy who invited him to Shabbat dinners and community events. Black said that his friend doubted he would convince him to change his views he just wanted Black to share in the Jewish community thing. They argued a lot about white nationalistic views. It was not the easiest of relationships but in the end the friendship they formed was enough to open Black's eyes to a world that was big enough for all, regardless of creed or color. He changed his mind about his former white nationalistic views, an absolutely remarkable change given the family he grew up in.

In our reading from Romans today Paul admonishes the communities to which he was writing. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) We are all formed by our upbringing, by the milieu in which we live, as well as the things we experience throughout our lives. In the U.S., we live in a culture that inundates us with advertising that is designed to keep us conformed to this world and the precepts of a consumer society. It is not easy to fight against such a constant barrage of images that invade our lives. Our families, friends, organizations we belong to and society at large pressure us to stay within the bounds of tradition, culture, class, to be who "we're supposed to be." But Paul implores us to do everything we can to shake off the effects of those things that fill our lives and measure our lives by how close we are living to the example of Christ's life. Only then will we be able to "discern the will of God – what is good and true and perfect." Romans 12:2b

And Paul reminds us constantly of our need to live out our faith in community – the faith community that he calls the body of Christ. As Christians, we exist as members of the body of Christ. Together we learn to interpret the scriptures, and wrestle with what it means to live according to God's word in the society in which we live... today. It is a word that empowers the beloved community to walk into the world proclaiming a gospel of justice and reconciliation for all people regardless of color, creed, age, or anything else that threatens to separate us from one another and from God.

Jesus asks his disciples this question, "Who do you say I am." You can imagine them racking their brains for an intelligent sounding answer. Simon Peter found the right words. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God – not a static God who spoke through the prophets to a particular time or place but a living, dynamic God who continues to speak and act and call his people to live out the gospel truth.

I hope each one of you will reflect on this question this coming week as you make plans for the Fall. Who do you say Jesus is? How important is Jesus in your life? What does he mean to you – not just as you recite the creed or come to church and say nice words to your friends but in the way you live your lives. Does your knowledge of Jesus change the way you use your talents, the kind of people you hang around, the experiences you give your children and what you teach them as they grow up, the way you use your time, the way you use your money? How much energy do you put into becoming like Jesus in every way? As much as you put into your work, the teams you support, the way you prepare your kids for a successful future? The way you live your life matters, not in terms of your salvation but in the way you allow or disallow God's kingdom to become a reality on earth at this time in history. Jesus shows us the kind of compassion God has for this world. Who you think he is has everything to do with who you will become.

So, I say to you as I say to myself over and over again: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Amen

Rev. Sandy