

Charlottesville

Matthew 22: 34-40

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We were all sickened by the events that happened in Charlottesville last weekend. It was a weekend of protest by white supremacists groups and anti-protesters. It erupted into violence, including the death of a young Charlottesville woman who was killed when a white supremacist intentionally drove his car into a crowd of anti-protesters. Say news reports, the driver was a young Ohio man who had a history of Nazi fascination and idolized Adolph Hitler. He was in Charlottesville for a rally called *Unite the Right*.

And, as tragic as this incident was, what has most bothered me (as an American and as a Christian) was seeing the images of Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists groups marching openly with Nazi and Confederate flags, banners with the swastika, some in camouflage militia gear, armed with guns and semi-automatic weapons. They marched carrying torches reminiscent of old-school-terror-inspiring Klan marches while shouting racial slurs at African Americans and slogans such as “Jews will not replace us.”

In downtown Charlottesville, one of the oldest synagogues in Virginia, Beth Israel, had gathered for Shabbat worship on Friday evening, while worshipping men dressed in fatigues carrying semi-automatic rifles stood across the street. A writer for *The Atlantic* reports that Nazi websites posted a call to burn the synagogue buildings. The congregation exited safely through a back door.

I remain stunned that a weekend like that happened in our country in 2017. It was Charlottesville, a college town known for its charm and hospitality but it could have happened anywhere. As it did in 1979 in our city Greensboro when the Klan-communists shootings occurred. Organizers for the *Unite the Right* rally had targeted Charlottesville with a national call for white supremacists to gather, under the ruse of its being a protest over the city’s pending decision to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee. But the rally in reality was a blatant demonstration of racist ideology aimed particularly at Jews and African Americans. We may all have differing opinions about the removal of statues or the renaming of schools or university buildings ...and those different opinions are worthy of debate and conversation. But Charlottesville, last weekend, was not about that. It was about the dark place that racism has in our society.

Richard Spencer, one of the organizers of the Charlottesville rally and the leading voice in the Alt Right movement, is now headed to Texas for a September rally called, *White Lives Matter*.

The rally's organizer announced this week, "The event will be to protest the liberal anti-white agenda, which includes white guilt, which leads to white genocide."

So the events of Charlottesville has taken the simmering issue of racism out from the margins and thrust it onto center-stage. Today, we, as Christians, cannot ignore what is now before us. Evangelist Billy Graham, not one known for being out-front on social issues, said twenty years ago, "Race and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today."

I am disappointed because I thought, perhaps naively, that as Americans we had made more progress. Some have been saying for years that racism was still a center-stage issue...that it was often subtle and out of sight to most white Americans. But If there is any hope in Charlottesville, it is that the events will wake us up to the reality of where we find ourselves today.

I

Yes, I am disturbed and disappointed as an American. But my primary lens is as a Christian. You have often heard me say that our most important Presbyterian principle is that "people of good conscience may differ." For instance, on the issue of statue removal or removing names from public buildings or schools, we, as Christians, could and should engage in a faithful dialogue. I was challenged by an op-ed piece in yesterday's Greensboro paper written by a distinguished Irish sculptor who has designed and built many statues in the Triad. He brings another perspective. Our Presbyterian principle would tell us that coming out on different sides of this issue would *not* be a litmus test for who was the better or more faithful Christian. No, people of good conscience may differ.

However, racism or white supremacy or a neo-Nazi ideology that espouses hate for Jews, is *not* an area where people of good conscience may differ.

Racism is sin.

Racism is evil.

Racism stands over against everything the Christian gospel proclaims and believes.

No one should take my word on this. We simply need to read the gospel, read the New Testament, see the life of Jesus, hear the Apostle Paul say: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all... are one in Christ Jesus." Or hear the prophet Isaiah say: "Lift up your eyes on high and see...who created these, calling them all by name, the Creator of the ends of the earth;" and hear Jesus' words that are the simplest, most direct and most profound for what it means to be a Christian. It is our second lesson for today.

Like so many times before, the religious officials were trying to trap and discredit Jesus. One of them asked Jesus:

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Well, there were more than five hundred Jewish laws, there were moral laws, cleanliness, eating, and ceremonial laws. It was a landmine of a question.

So what did Jesus say?

Love.

Stunningly simple. Absolutely direct and profound.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang *all* the law and the prophets.

Love is the key for Jesus. Love is the key for interpreting everything that God has revealed to us. When it comes to racism...manifested in hate speech, white supremacy and Neo-Nazi ideology, this is the appropriate time to ask the simple question: What would Jesus do?

II

Part of my sadness this week comes from being born in the mid-fifties and living through the civil rights issues of the sixties. When I was ten years old, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in the yard of my Presbyterian minister.

What was he doing and saying? Though I was not always paying attention, I am pretty sure he was reading the words of Jesus and taking them seriously...which apparently can get you into trouble.

As a kid and teen, I saw my little Eastern North Carolina church and many churches in those days put race on the front burner, challenging white Christians to change our attitudes about race. Because in the end, it was both a moral issue and a spiritual issue; it was about following Jesus.

My sadness is that I thought that battle was mostly behind us. Apparently not.

So once again, it is time for the followers of Jesus to make our voice known: Racism is sin. Racism is evil. Racism stands over against everything the Christian Gospel proclaims and believes.

III

Fortuitously and providentially we, at First Presbyterian, find ourselves with an amazing opportunity to do something significant on this issue.

As many of you know, our church was formed in 1824 with a dozen members. What you might not know, is that four of those members were slaves. As the church grew in the following decades, the slave members also grew. By 1860 and the Civil War, First Presbyterian had thirty-

seven members who were slaves. After the Civil War, in 1867, our former slave members formed their own congregation, the St. James Presbyterian Church. This year, this vibrant Greensboro congregation, is celebrating their one hundred fiftieth anniversary.

More than a year ago we started thinking about how our congregation could honor our sister congregation, whom some say “was born out of our balcony.” So on the last Sunday in October, we will join with the St. James congregation for a joint worship service in this sanctuary. We will celebrate and acknowledge our common history as we have served the kingdom of God. As a part of all of this, there is a planning group of elders from both congregations engaged in constructing this worship service.

In addition to our work with St. James, several years ago, our session appointed a Race Task Force. This group continues to offer ways for our congregation to engage our faith in important conversations about race. And this summer, our sixty-two elders have been reading a provocative book called *Waking Up White*, which as a session, we will discuss in small groups this fall. These are just small ways where we are hearing the words of Jesus to love our neighbor and to overcome evil with good.

So today, in light of Charlottesville, I ask you, I challenge you, to hear with fresh ears the words of Jesus and apply them to the racial unrest of our time. God needs you and me and First Presbyterian to make a difference in this time.

Some lament but I rejoice that First Presbyterian is a *purple church*; that we are made up of blue and red members, people with different political alliances and beliefs. But I beg you, I plead with you, not to hear the issue of race as a political issue. The gospel of Jesus Christ came long before any political party and transcends any political persuasion. Let us let Jesus be Jesus.

IV

Finally, I have long admired Martin Luther King, Jr. He led a non-violent movement for civil rights when he or others could have stoked the fires of anger and lit an explosive, violent campaign.

But King was a preacher, educated at Boston University School of Theology. Because he followed Jesus, he never advocated for violence. Instead his message was love and his method was non-violent resistance.

At the height of the civil rights movement (1963), King was arrested in Birmingham and put in jail. While there, he wrote his famous letter to the ministers of white moderate Christian churches.

This is in part what he wrote:

First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not.... the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother."

In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern."

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away...and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation.

It seems that this call for white moderate Christians to act – has become as pertinent today as it was in 1963.