

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
10th Sunday after Pentecost August 13, 2017
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca
Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Matt. 14:22-33
After Charlottesville

This week I had some hard choices in deciding on the topic for my sermon. Should I focus on Jesus walking on water or Peter's fear of the waves when he made the hard choice to get out of the boat of his comfort zone? I finally settled on the story of Joseph. The whole story is never heard on a Sunday morning, as it covers 13 chapters of the Book of Genesis, with more twists in the plot than a cable tv drama. I recommend you read in its entirety sometime. I was going to give a brief synopsis of Joseph's saga before making the main point, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." But then, yesterday happened.

Hundreds of white supremacists and Nazis descended on Charlottesville, Virginia beginning with a night time march, carrying assault rifles and torches to the University of Virginia campus. The torches were a threat-deliberately evoking the cross burnings and lynch mobs of a few decades ago. They were meant to instill terror.

In the morning, clergy from every denomination linked arms with other counter protestors and lined the sidewalks of Charlottesville, singing hymns to drown out the ugly chants of the mob. They sang This Little Light of Mine, because the light of Christ has come into this world and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it. Hate can never overcome the love of God.

Seeing the footage of yesterday on the news and in the posts from friends and the Diocese of Virginia on social media yesterday, I was struck by a few observations about the KKK and neo-Nazis of today. Unlike the skin heads of the 80s and 90s and the lynch mobs of the Jim Crow era, the white nationalists gathered in VA yesterday looked so ordinary. They didn't cover their faces with hoods or sheets and other than the militia groups, most were wearing polo shirts. Except for the twisted expressions of hate on their faces, you might think that these were a group of teachers, or accountants or store clerks; people you would meet any day of the week. And of course, they are.

Many if not most of these so-called alternative-right people identify themselves as Christians. They may be back in church this morning, feeling quite pleased with themselves. And so, clergy across the country have ripped up the sermons that they prepared earlier in the week to talk about the sin of racism. One bishop I saw in a video last night said that if you don't hear your clergy speaking about race tomorrow and denouncing white supremacy, you need to find yourself another church.

We have avoided the conversation about race in our country, preferring instead to gloss over our history of slavery, and the Jim Crow practices and prejudices that continue to plague us. What has simmered for so long has reared its ugly head and come out in the open, emboldened and empowered over the past year by attacks on civil rights, the promotion of violence and the white supremacists who have gained high positions in our government.

The Black Lives Matter movement tried to reopen the conversation about race after so many African American boys and men have been shot and killed. Their slogan too often drowned out by those yelling All Lives Matter, discounting the very real experiences of those who are black or brown in this country. Yesterday, the cry was "white lives matter." One observer yesterday said something to the effect of, when people say Black Lives Matter, what they mean is that Black lives are as meaningful and worthy of respect and dignity as any other. When the neo-Nazis shout 'White lives Matter', what they are saying is, only white lives matter to us.

Does this sound Christian to you? Is this what it means to follow Jesus? We are called to be God's beloved community, to build one another up, loving our neighbors as ourselves. All our neighbors, not just those who look and believe just like us.

In a statement made late yesterday, Bishop Eugene Tayler Sutton of Maryland said,

“Now more than ever, we need people of good will to speak out clearly and courageously against the disturbing tide of white supremacist rhetoric that wants to divide and prevent us from coming together. Too often in our nation's history, people of goodwill have chosen to remain silent in the face of bigotry, refusing to risk having unpleasant conversations that might disturb colleagues, friends and the ones we love. All too often, we prefer maintaining a tenuous "peace" with bigots rather than doing the harder work of telling the truth and committing to a justice that leads to reconciliation. We cannot make peace with hatred. We cannot let injustice go unchallenged...anywhere, anytime. Let's not let this tragedy go unnoticed and forgotten. Let's not let this opportunity to challenge hate and bigotry pass us by. If we in the Jesus movement do not speak out, who will?”

The bishop asked that churches have a minute of silence in which we might reflect on these events and to consider how we might respond both individually and as a community of faith.

When Peter was afraid of the wind and the waves, he turned to Jesus, crying out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus immediately took his hand and pulled him up. Let us look to Jesus and ask for mercy; for ourselves and our country. "Lord, Jesus, take us by the hand and lead us into your ways of peace."

We will observe that minute of silence now and then I will close with two prayers from our Book of Common Prayer.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. (BCP p.823)*

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. (BCP p.824)*