



“I Did Not Know There Was So Much Malice”

Scripture – Matthew 15:21-28

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, August 20, 2017

The past week has highlighted two of the monstrous evils stalking our planet: the belief that one *race* is superior and the belief that one *religion* is superior. Two men – one in Virginia and one in Barcelona – used automobiles to kill and maim and terrorize. White supremacists slithered into Charlottesville to spew their venom at African Americans and Jews. When it was over, a young woman and two police officers were dead, and dozens were injured. A disciple of ISIS driving a van down a crowded sidewalk in Barcelona mowed down more than one hundred people, murdering 13.

Both acts must be repudiated not only for their violence, but for the ideology behind the acts. At their roots, both dogmas are the same: people who look and think as we do are the chosen and that bestows upon us the right to destroy those who are different.

It is ironic – or an act of the Spirit – that the lectionary has designated this particular text from Matthew as the gospel reading for today. It is the most embarrassing passage in the New Testament, because it reveals prejudice in Jesus.

To set the stage, Jesus has been butting heads with Pharisees and scribes. Exposing their hypocrisy, Jesus points out that they follow scrupulous rituals to make sure that what they eat is pure, but the way they act toward others is cruel. He pulls his disciples to the side and explains that it is not what goes into you that defiles you, but what comes out. If your heart is corrupt, your actions will be evil.

Our text begins by informing us that after his tussle with the Pharisees, Jesus set his sights on a new destination – but not just any location. Jesus trekked to a specific piece of turf – the region of Tyre and Sidon – present day Syria. The first century audience understood the implication immediately. Jesus went to the area where Jewish and Gentile boundaries intermingle. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter says this “is a place of tension and prejudice” and he points out that the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the people of Tyre “are our bitterest enemies.”¹

Soon after Jesus and his followers arrive in this contentious region, a Gentile woman steps across the boundary and confronts him. The scene is filled with tension because she is a Canaanite, which is shorthand for Gentile – foreigner – enemy.

The woman begs, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” If this episode followed the storyline of other encounters Jesus had with people pleading for healing, we would expect him to

say something compassionate and send the girl home healthy. But this story is unlike any other story in the gospels. After this Canaanite woman begs Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus ignores her. The disciples say to Jesus, “Get rid of her.”

What is left unsaid, but obvious, is “Get rid of her *because she’s not one of us. She is a filthy Gentile.*”

Jesus appears to comply with their request saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, “My mission is to Jews, not Gentiles, so be on your way.”

However, this mother is desperate. She drops to her knees and begs, “Lord, help me.”

This is the moment the scene becomes awkward. A mother is pleading for her child and Jesus is not only cold to her request, he insults her. Jesus replies, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the *dogs*.”

New Testament commentators have tripped all over themselves trying to take the sting out of his harsh words. One actually suggests that Jesus was referring to cuddly puppies.

However, there is no reason to soften the tone of this text. The gospel writer intends for it to be unseemly. The writer wants a question to arise in our minds: Was even Jesus prejudiced?

As it turns out, this mother is not only desperate, she is clever. She responds, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

She is down on her knees at his feet; exactly where dogs would be. She is pleading, “Yes, Lord, but my daughter! Just drop a few crumbs.” And a split second before one of the disciples shouts, “Scram!” Jesus says, “Great is your faith. Let it be done as you wish.” And her daughter is healed.

One way of understanding this passage is to say that the woman partnered with God to teach Jesus a profound lesson. His mission was not to be restricted to his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters. His mission was to everyone.

Another way to understand this passage is that Jesus humbled himself in front of his disciples in order to set a trap for them. He knew their prejudice toward Gentiles was one of their unquestioned assumptions and he was determined to expose it and show them a better way. This is the reason he took them to a region where they were bound to encounter Gentiles. And that is why he did it immediately after teaching them that it is not what goes into them that defiles them, but what comes out of them – such as bigotry.

Later, when he would tell the story of the Good Samaritan, he would again puncture their prejudice by painting the outsider as the hero of the story. Then, when he gave them a new commandment to love others as themselves, they would understand that he meant to love everyone, not only those of your own religion or ethnic group.

Alan Zimmerman is the president of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville. Last Saturday morning, when members of their congregation gathered for worship, he stood outside along with the security guard they hired. For 30 minutes, three neo-Nazis dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from their house of worship. Had they tried to enter the synagogue, he does not know what he would have done...Several times parades of Nazis marched pass their building shouting, ‘There’s the synagogue!’ followed by chants of ‘Seig Heil’ and anti-Semitic slurs. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols... This is not Germany in 1939; this is the United States in 2017... A man in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue several times. Was he casing the building or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? Later, Zimmerman noticed that the man who drove the car in the terror attack wore the same polo shirt; apparently the uniform of one of the white supremacist groups.”²

The Southern Poverty Law Center tracks hate groups in the United States, and they have identified four such groups in Delaware: a Neo-Nazi group, an anti-Muslim group, a black separatist group, and the Ku Klux Klan. For those of you who live in Pennsylvania, you will be unsettled to know that they have identified 40 hate groups in your state. And in the entire country, they have identified 917 hate groups.

Over the past year, I have come to realize how naïve I have been. I have spent too much of my life around well-educated and well-intentioned Presbyterians. I had no idea there was so much malice in our nation.

Either you believe God is the Creator or you believe the world is an accident and people make up the rules to suit themselves. The opening chapter of the first book of the Bible declares that human beings are created in God's image. Therefore, no race is superior to another. White supremacy is not only an insult to people of color; it is an affront to God and must be named for what it is: EVIL!

Many forget that Jesus was not a Caucasian Christian. He was a Middle Eastern Jew. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists would not only have hounded Jesus for his race and his religion, they would have eagerly bid for the opportunity to drive the nails through his hands and feet. Jesus was anathema to their core convictions.

Our nation has an ugly history of racism. We still struggle to embody the words of our Declaration of Independence that all are created equal. We still struggle to embody the words of the Golden Rule to treat others the way we want to be treated. And, we still struggle to embody the command of Jesus to "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Tony McAleer was a white racist. He tells "about one of his co-founders of *Life After Hate*, a nonprofit group dedicated to helping people leave neo-Nazi and other extremist groups. His colleague was being served at McDonald's by an elderly African-American woman who noticed the swastika tattooed on his hand. She looked at him and said, 'Oh honey, you're so much better than that.'"

McAleer says, "That seed germinated for years until the man left white nationalism and dedicated himself to helping others leave." He adds, "The hardest thing in the world is to have compassion for those who have no compassion, but those are the people who need it the most."

When McAleer presents workshops, invariably someone gets ruffled and says, "We need legislation, not compassion!" McAleer says there is a place for both, but he prefers to talk about what he calls "internal legislation." He says that "offering something more beautiful is more effective than simply criminalizing the ugly."³

Of course, changing people's minds is a slow process. So, our near future will most likely see more violence. Having generated a strong backlash against their actions in Charlottesville, and with more cities debating the removal of statues of Confederate soldiers, I expect white supremacists to become more paranoid and to lash out with deadly force. I pray I am wrong, but I fear increased violence in the days ahead. I especially worry about Richmond, where our daughter and grandchildren live. The most famous street is Monument Avenue. At every round-about there is a towering monument – Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and others.

I suspect police forces will be pushed to the limit. I hope that they will be able to limit the bloodshed. It will help if everyone holding a government office will clearly delineate between hate groups that espouse racism and anti-Semitism, and counter-protestors who denounce their vile rhetoric, rather than trying to draw some fuzzy equivalence between the two sides. In Charlottesville, white supremacists carried handguns, assault rifles, clubs and metal poles. They wore helmets and riot vests. They made Nazi salutes, screamed racial slurs, and chanted

“Jews will not replace us” while marching like military troops. Some websites called for the burning of the synagogue.

As for terrorism by ISIS and the like, military intelligence and force will be necessary to halt its spread. But terrorist ideology cannot be annihilated simply on the battlefield. There must also be a battle for the souls of those who justify eliminating innocents.

So what can you and I do other than wring our hands? I have six suggestions. Sorry, I could not stop with just three.

1. Do not be hesitant to name terrorism for what it is – evil. Whether that terrorism is radical Islam or white supremacy, it is evil and we must have the courage to say so. During the racial turmoil that set our country on edge during the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King said, “History will have recorded that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” We must not be afraid to stand for what is right and true and good according to the gospel.
2. We must pray. Please do not nod your head and say, “Of course, that’s the sort of pious thing a pastor is supposed to say, so let’s humor him. I have noticed that when a person of faith is asked to pray, one of two things generally occurs. Either the person prays for God to fix the situation and then excuses himself from any responsibility, or the person agrees to pray, but never actually does it because they put prayer in the same category as wishful thinking.

However, prayer enhances our reverence for people. Prayer can help us regain our awe and respect and gratitude for our own life and for the lives of others. Enhancing our reverence for others reminds us that others hurt as we do; experience joys and setbacks as we do; have hopes and dreams as we do. When prayer enhances our reverence for others, we begin to want the same good for them that we want for ourselves and we feel the moral responsibility to do something about it.

3. Do not respond to hate groups with violence or ugliness. Police may have to use force, but we do not. Violence confirms their belief that they are victims and aids them in recruiting angry young men.
4. Advocate for liberty and justice for all by working for the common good. Reject strategies that pit one group against another or seek personal good at the expense of another. Treating others the way you want to be treated creates a caring society where discrimination can be erased.
5. Plant seeds through acts of kindness. God’s Spirit can produce amazing results from small seeds planted within a person’s heart. Double down on your commitment to extend compassion to others. It will help you stand firm against hate without becoming hateful.
6. Strengthen your friendships with people most targeted by hate groups – African Americans, Jews, Muslims and members of the LGBT community. Those of us who are white Protestant Christians do not know the fear of white-hooded men carrying torches, neo-Nazis marching past synagogues, or the media giving the impression that all Muslims are terrorists. Build ties with people of different races, different religions, and the LGBT community.

For people who are committed to following Jesus, indifference is not an option. To paraphrase the words of another: Have we adjusted our eyes to the darkness, or will we devote ourselves to spreading light?⁴

NOTES:

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p.321;
2. Alan Zimmerman, "In Charlottesville, the Local Jewish Community Presses On," ReformJudaism.org, August 14, 2017;
3. Jason Byassee, "Confessions of a White Racist," Sojourners magazine, August 2017. p.17-19;
4. From the sermon of Cornel West delivered in Charlottesville on Saturday morning, August 12.

Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones

Eternal God, this is an ugly moment in our nation's history. Hate groups are feeling emboldened to step out of the dark shadows, to spread their vile dogma of a superior race, to draft new recruits, and to demonize people on the basis of race, religion and sexual orientation. We know that you create all people in your image and to claim otherwise is a sin against you and a threat to peace.

Mighty God, we abhor the terrorist acts in Charlottesville and Barcelona as you do. The dark side of the human character and the destructive nature of evil have left a trail of tears and bitterness and despair. Such chilling disregard for human life is impossible to fathom.

These deadly deeds warn us once again that combining extreme ideology with the demonization of others creates a combustible mixture that can explode with devastating consequences. We pray that all who glorify killing will be confronted by the inherent evil of their thoughts and that those who have no conscience will be stopped before they destroy others. Remind all of your children that each of us is created in your image and that terrorizing any of your creatures is violence against you.

Merciful God, our hearts ache for the families of those who were killed and for those whose injuries will be a constant reminder of the horror they experienced. We pray that you will draw them close to you so that they may sense your constant presence in the difficult days ahead.

Lord of all, touch these families with our prayers so that they may know that millions grieve the loss of their loved ones and yearn to help shoulder their suffering. We pray that they may be buoyed by the support of others and find deep inner strength to cope with their pain.

The atrocities that occurred in Charlottesville and Barcelona remind us that we will surely forge a path to hell if we do not put more energy into standing for what you have shown us is right and true and just, if we do not treat one another with kindness and respect, and if we shirk our responsibility to promote the common good. Evil is relentless. Therefore, we must be persistent in spreading goodwill.

Hatred never takes a day off. Therefore, we must be determined to extend compassion. Violence continues nonstop. Therefore, we must be steadfast in seeking peace.

Give us strength, God, give us determination, to spread the qualities of your kingdom here on earth.

Together, we join in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "**Our Father...**