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“The Content of Our Character”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Romans 12:1-8

Wow. What a couple of weeks we have been through. Charlottesville. Death by hatred driving a car. Angry mobs. Racist chants. Hateful signs. Armed white supremacists. Durham. Symbol of our racist past brought down. Threats of protests. Fear of violence. Strong emotions. Chapel Hill. More protests. Unrest. No decisions. More fear. More anger. More debate.

Our hearts have been overwhelmed by the weight of it all.

Over the past few weeks, we have read and seen many different reactions to the hatred that flowed so freely in Charlottesville. We have had our own reactions and have talked with friends and confidants about our own fears, angers, disgusts, and anxieties. One thing that has been clear to so many of us from the very beginning is this – the church must not be silent. Thankfully, the church was not silent on that Saturday in Charlottesville as church leaders from many denominations (including our own!) came out, along with other religious leaders,

and took a peaceful stand against hatred, racism, and violence, locking arms and making clear that such vitriolic rhetoric and action were not only not welcome and not acceptable, they were sinful, evil – plainly against what God intends for humanity and in distinct opposition to Christ’s teachings and to the teachings of our Jewish and Muslim friends. There was a vast divide between those who came to profess love for one another, no matter our differences, and those who came to profess a hatred for any but their own kind.

The session and pastors of this congregation also took a stand and issued a statement, the main portion of which reads:

The events of this past weekend in Charlottesville deserve a clear response from the church. Let there be no confusion. We, the leadership at First Presbyterian Church, denounce racism and any words, acts, or implications that are intended to raise one group of people over another and/or to cause harm to any person. We denounce hatred and any acts of violence. We believe that God is love and that we are called to love one another. In the human family, no group of people has been created by God to be above another. We are all created in love and called to love one another as we love God. God’s image is in all of God’s creatures equally and those who love God cannot elevate one group of people over and against another. The hateful rhetoric and actions of white supremacist groups, neo-Nazis, and the

KKK have no place in our nation or in our world. We have worked against such hateful, racist, exclusive rhetoric and actions in the past and we will continue to work against them in the future. Our faith guides us in this, as does our nation's history.

Jesus' clear call to his disciples is that we love God and love one another. We cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we are unable to love our neighbors (no matter their race, creed, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, or economic status), whom we have seen.¹

And so we begin with a clear statement, naming racism and hatred against any group as abhorrent sin. But we all know this is not where we can end. We ask the questions repeatedly – “How are we to respond to such hatred? Who are we to be as followers of Jesus? What are we to *do*?”

In the book of Romans, Paul spends much energy trying to help the early followers of Christ understand who Jesus is and what the grace and mercy of Christ means for them. In the past, those who wanted to please God made sacrifices at the altar – burnt offerings, they were called. But in Christ, by the mercies of God, no such sacrifice is necessary. Instead, Paul writes, present your

¹ <https://firstpres-durham.org/2017/08/response-to-events-in-charlottesville-va/>

bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. As James Van Tholen writes:

Offerings don't burn anymore, says Paul. [Burnt] offerings aren't even a part of your lives, because nothing stands between you and God anymore. Because you have received his mercy, you know Jesus Christ. So now that you have experienced his unfathomable goodness, now that salvation is yours, don't spend any time worrying about burnt offerings; make your life an offering instead. Become a living sacrifice.²

So how do we *know* how God wants us to live our lives? We know how to live because we have the witness of Jesus' life. From Jesus, we learn about humility. We learn about love for one another, especially the poor, those in need, and those despised by the world. From Jesus, we learn not to value money and power, but to value forgiveness, gratitude, simplicity, hospitality, and community.

We also learn how to live from the leaders and writers of the early church. We know from Paul that humility comes when we don't think too highly of ourselves, when we recognize our dependence upon God, and when we value the gifts of others. We are meant to be a people of community, a body with many members of equal importance. We are meant to be a people of love.

² James R. Van Tholen, *Where All Hope Lies: Sermons for the Liturgical Year*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 2003).

We know from the writer of the Galatians what the fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control. Where we see these things, the Spirit is guiding. When we enact these things, we are doing what God wants us to do!

The writer of the letters of John teaches us to love one another:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4).

How do we follow Jesus? We set our minds on Christ Jesus. We reject the ways of the world - jealousy, anger, hatred, factions, idolatry, and pride - that do not conform to God ways. When our minds are in Christ, we are transformed – again and again and again – not because of what we have done but because of God's gracious gift to us all. In Christ, we are reconciled to God and to one another. We know how to live and we know what to do.

Sometimes, even when it is hard, we know what we need to do.

I am intrigued by a story that appeared first in the *Washington Post* in October of last year, and has resurfaced again after the horrible display of white nationalism in Charlottesville. The story is about a young man named Derek Black and it begins in his youth.

Derek was born to a prominent white-nationalist family in Florida. His father started a popular white nationalist website. His godfather is David Duke. He was a rising star in the white nationalist movement. He displayed his confederate flags proudly on the back of his pick-up truck.

After high school and some time at a community college, he went to college to study medieval European history – New College, a liberal-arts college three hours from home. He kept his beliefs hidden on campus, even while calling in early each morning to host his own white nationalist radio show with his dad.

But his anonymity didn't last. Before long someone found his face and name connected with his dad's website. He was ostracized on campus. As Derek moved off campus and kept a low profile, students at his college debated how to respond. Some were angry and even hateful. Others felt betrayed. Still others wondered if there was any way they could change his mind.

Then there was Matthew Stevenson, a Jewish student at New College. He had seen some of Derek's hateful rhetoric against Jews.

Matthew decided his best chance to affect Derek's thinking was not to ignore him or confront him, but simply to include him. "Maybe he'd never spent time with a Jewish person before," Matthew remembered thinking. Matthew had started hosting weekly Shabbat dinners at his campus apartment shortly after enrolling in New College in 2010. He was the only Orthodox Jew at a school with little Jewish infrastructure, so he began cooking for a small group of students at his apartment each Friday night. Matthew always drank from a kiddush cup and said the traditional prayers, but most of his guests were Christian, atheist, black or Hispanic — anyone open-minded enough to listen to a few blessings in Hebrew. Now, in the fall of 2011, Matthew invited Derek to join them.³

It was the beginning of transformation for them both.

Derek accepted Matthew's invitation and joined him that first night. Then he came the next week and the next. Over shared bread and cup, conversation flowed easily, friendships formed, fear dissipated, and in the ongoing weeks and months, the small community built a deep level of trust. Derek listened closely for much of the time and soon found himself questioning the words he had himself used against other races. Time passed and by the time he graduated, Derek knew that he no longer held the same beliefs as his white nationalist family. He made a

³ Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*, "The White Flight of Derek Black," October 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.8932393972f2

public statement of inclusion and acceptance of all. As a result, he lost what he had known as family, but was able to live at peace with himself.

Many of us don't believe that such transformation is possible, and yet, we know of times when it has happened in even more dramatic ways, like when Saul found his anti-Christian beliefs transformed on the road to Damascus, or when we ourselves have found the strength to confront addiction, anger, hatred, or fear in our own lives.

But as miraculous as Derek's transformation is, another important transformation took place a little bit earlier, in Matthew, when he rested in and trusted his own faith, when he was not conformed to this world of fear, suspicions, factions, or pride, but rather was transformed by the renewing of his mind. When he set aside his own fears and hesitations and lived out his own life as an offering to God, his voice became a harbinger of welcome, his home, a place of peace, his table, an invitation to reconciliation, his heart, a locus of forgiveness, his body, a living sacrifice to God through its actions of love.

That was Matthew – But what are *we* to do in this wild and scary world in which we live? How are we to be?

We are to be God's children, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, which are set on Christ Jesus our Lord. We are to do those things God has gifted us to do.

So if you are wondering what you should do, or think, or say, or believe, test yourself against the fruits of the Spirit. Test yourself among the community of faith by talking with one another. Test yourself in prayer and supplication. If you love God, and you love one another (and yes, that includes your enemies), you will know what is good and acceptable and perfect. You will know what to do.

The hatred around us will not win. Love has already won in Christ Jesus. And so, dear friends, let us make sure the voice of love and the actions of love are felt around the world today and forever more.

Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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