

Year A, August 20, 2017
11 Pentecost (Proper 15)
Christ Church, Mexia

At my age, if I take a fifteen-minute break, I need to be retrained. Given that it has been four weeks since I stood here, hang on!

Last weekend, my alma mater announced the appointment of the first female, African American, Simone Askew, as the Cadet First Captain, the leader of the Corps of Cadets, the highest cadet leadership position at West Point. African Americans, male and female, have held high positions of leadership in the past, and male African Americans have served as Cadet First Captain, but this was the first female to be selected for the top position - an historic moment. By the way, the first male was selected in 1980 and he currently serves as a four-star general commanding American Forces in South Korea. But this most recent appointment was a milestone to be celebrated.

Sadly, this news was completely over-shadowed by the horrific events in Charlottesville, VA where a young woman, Heather Heyer, was murdered by a white supremacist, and many others injured, because she/they were standing up to people espousing hatred and bigotry in a public demonstration. It is astonishing to me that such demonstrations still occur over 50 years since the Civil Rights Act became law. But the lack of condemnation among the leadership of our country towards violence and the concept and aims of white supremacy is even more astonishing, especially because many of these same leaders claim to be Christian.

These events and observations have left many of us asking what should we do? What, if anything, should be our response? And if you aren't asking these kinds of questions, let me suggest that you should be. In our Baptismal Covenant, we have sworn to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves" and to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being." And these vows compel us to action and have implications for the answers to our questions.

Brian McLaren, preacher, teacher and writer, wrote about the event: "I wish we could simply ignore the Unite the Right groups gathering in Charlottesville this weekend. But I do not believe they can be ignored. They must be confronted in love, not returning insult for insult or anger for anger, but seeking to overcome evil with good." Yes, we should respect the dignity of those with whom we disagree; we must love them as our neighbor, but as Christians we have a duty to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ." So, what can we do? And I cannot emphasize the word "do" enough. About 9 months ago, I asked you to

pray about the instances of racism and religious discrimination that had begun to manifest themselves more openly in our country. But I feel that prayer is no longer enough. Prayer is needed, but it alone is insufficient now. Why?

The Rev. Elizabeth Lott at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, LA reminded her members last Sunday of a letter written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL on September 15, 1963 by four white supremacists of the KKK. In it, he said in part:

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Luke warm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make the real promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremist for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

Shamefully, this letter could be written today. Those are the questions we must still answer today. That kind of apathy is what we must avoid now.

Andy, our Diocesan Bishop, joined with other religious leaders, representing several different traditions in Houston, to issue a statement from which a few highlights I share with you now:

We must speak up to a world that needs to hear our verses about truth, civility, love, and peace. We must strive to speak to a world that is mute without us so that we can gain victory with

our voices over violence and inhumanity against men, women, and children. ... Permission is not granted to human hands to destroy God's handiwork; to do so is an act of ultimate moral weakness. Rather, defending the poor, sheltering the widow, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and loving your neighbor are demonstrations of ultimate moral strength.

And I am so proud of our national church for standing up for transgender people; for threatening to move our General Convention from Austin next year if the "bathroom bill" was passed in Texas and for encouraging the legislators who opposed it, until thankfully it was defeated. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael, noted that the events last weekend demonstration "there is a darkness in our land" and asks us "to pray and speak out for all God's children who have reason to be afraid in these frightening times." And there is still cause for concern here in this state. For example, Texas Senate Bill 4 that goes into effect September 1st forbids sanctuary cities, allows police officers to question people about their immigration status, etc. Michael, in his message last Sunday, asked where do we go from here - chaos or community? And then he continued: "This Sunday and in the days and weeks to come, as we gather in community to worship God and then move about in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, social circles and more, we will be faced with a choice. I ask and invite us as congregations and individuals who are together the Episcopal Church of the Jesus Movement to intentionally, purposely, and liturgically rededicate ourselves to the way of Jesus, the work of racial reconciliation, the work of healing and dismantling everything that wounds and divides us, the work of becoming God's Beloved Community." I hope you will consider and pray about his words.

When we were in Prague a couple of weeks ago, Janet and I visited the ghetto and concentration camp at Teresin. It was a place where Jews were sent initially, and it was shown to the International Red Cross as a facility where Jews were treated so well. Even propaganda films were made there - showing soccer games, other activities, happy people, but all the participants in those films ended up in Auschwitz where they were exterminated. Having seen such evil up close, especially that of the Nazi party, leaves me with no tolerance for people who seek to perpetuate that party, fly those flags publicly or shout those ideals in our country today. And any person of conscience, whether Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or especially a professed Christian, should have no hesitation in confronting such evil. My message is not politically motivated; it has everything to do with fulfilling our Baptismal Covenant.

Jesus points out to his disciples in the gospel reading today that the gentiles were referred to as "dogs" by the Jews of his time, but this exclusiveness, aggressiveness and implied dominance was not the way of God. It wasn't what went into their mouths that defiled the Jews, but what came out of them. Words

are important.

Jesus did not discriminate. Jesus defended and cared for the marginalized. So should we. What you should do is between you and God; we have all been given different gifts, and perhaps different understandings of God's Word. And there are more things in our current systems today that seek to oppress people than just the white supremacists - more subtle things, discrimination based not just on race or religion. So please reflect seriously on these matters today when we reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant in a few moments, and continue to ask God what you should do to further the kingdom of God here, now.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit. Amen.