

“What would you do?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
August 20, 2017 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 45:1-15

Unison Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

If ever the prayer we just prayed together was applicable, it is today given the current tensions and emotional state of our country. Today, we need to seriously consider what it means when we prayed together: Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again.

I'd like for you to silently answer these questions. If you would have been in Charlottesville last weekend, what would you have done? Which group did you identify with? Would you have remained on the sidelines or would you have marched? Would you have chanted? Would you have been tempted to join the violence? What thoughts are going through your mind right now? Please hold those thoughts.

I want to make it quite clear to everyone here today that I do not condone the violence and hate that took place in Charlottesville or for that matter, any other place in the USA or anyplace in the world: only recently, in Barcelona. Violence and hate speech are evil and divisive. Hate speech divides people. Violence only adds to the divide.

I especially relate to what the Presbyterian Outlook editor, Jill Duffield, said this week: (August 14, 2017 Presbyterian Outlook): I refuse to condone violence. I refuse to demonize another human being. I refuse to believe that anyone or anything is irredeemable or God-forsaken. I acknowledge my complicity with racism, oppression and injustice. I acknowledge the inherent racism, oppression and injustice in every institution in this country, including the church. I believe that God has the power to bring good from evil and is relentlessly on the side of the marginalized and vulnerable. I believe we are called to bless and pray for those who persecute us. I believe we are called to radical forgiveness. I believe that perfect love casts out fear. I believe that Jesus calls out evil and confronts it and therefore his followers are required to do so, too.

The week's media reporting after Charlottesville revealed varying opinions on what to do about the violence and hate speech. The events that took place in Charlottesville, I hope, will raise the collective national consciousness of the divisions in our country today. There are far too many people who don't want to become involved and it is my hope this event will mobilize more folks to stand for social justice and peace in our society.

In the face of Charlottesville what are we to do? How are we to react? Speaking personally, I was so overcome with sadness last week that all I could do initially was pray to God for guidance and for the people involved. I'm sure that many of you are wondering how to react – how to live, love and serve as Christ did while he was here on earth.

Back to my earlier question about the thoughts going through your mind right now about Charlottesville. I'd like for you to examine those thoughts in light of Jesus' words in John

13:34-35: **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

What troubles me the most about what’s going on in the USA today is that we are not loving one another as Christ has loved us. For example, Christ-followers can sometimes forget that our speech can be just as hate-filled as those we condemn. Are we demonstrating Christ’s love when we accuse someone of ‘white privilege’ or of being a racist?

Hate is easy. Loving is not. Let me say that again. Hate is easy. Loving is not. Loving your enemy is hard, darned hard and difficult. But it’s the route Christ-followers are to take. Jesus said in Matthew 5:45: **“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Most of Jesus’ words in the sermon on the mount are not easy. But Jesus didn’t say following him was easy.

There was a story on the Huffington Post website (BLACK VOICES 12/22/2016 05:12 pm ET) that all of us can take inspiration from. Daryl Davis, an accomplished keyboardist who has worked with Chuck Berry and Little Richard, has quite the side interest. For the past few decades the black musician, actor and author has made it his mission to befriend people in hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan by calmly confronting them with the question: “How can you hate me if you don’t even know me?”

Davis explained, “The most important thing I learned is that when you are actively learning about someone else you are passively teaching them about yourself. Give them a platform. You challenge them. But you don’t challenge them rudely or violently. You do it politely and intelligently. And when you do things that way chances are they will reciprocate and give you a platform.”

The story ends with Davis’ comment: Talking to Klansmen “has worked for me and I’ve proven it. I appeal to people’s common sense. I don’t seek to convert them but if they spend time with me, they can’t hate me. [The Klansman] sees that I want the same thing for my family as he does for his ... if you can work on the things in common, that’s how you build friendship.”

Davis loved the enemy. His story may inspire you. His story may frighten you. I tell his story as an example of how we can show love to those who hate us. To show that love, we have to be willing to communicate with each other as Davis did. This one-on-one meeting of the minds is not going to get done in the media or in a protest rally for peace. It gets done when we stop labeling people and start talking to them.

I firmly believe that each of us has a role to play today to calm the tensions in our society. Each of us has been blessed with certain talents the Bible calls gifts of the spirit. Some of us are better at writing, some of us are better at speaking, some of us are better at interpersonal relationships, some of us are better at organizing, some of us are better at praying. We all are gifted in various ways to contribute to forwarding God’s kingdom and doing God’s will.

We each have our own God-given skills and abilities to use to share God's love with others. God uses all of us for God's purposes in this world. So, I ask you to refrain from criticizing someone who isn't working for a cause the way you'd like for him or her to be involved. That person may be using his or her God-given skills and abilities to address the wrongs he or she sees – and the wrongs may not be the same ones you see. Talk with that individual to understand how he or she is working for God's kingdom.

We began this time together with a prayer that said, 'Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again.' I firmly believe that we can ask God for that wisdom and God will guide us. God is there guiding us if only we listen for God's voice.

Today's scripture lesson addresses forgiveness, but there's another important topic presented. Do you remember what Joseph said to his brothers about God's guidance in his life? Joseph said: **for God sent me before you to preserve life.** As Joseph matured and considered the events in his life that led him to Egypt, he realized that God was there all along through the evil his brothers had done to him, through the deceit of the woman who accused him of sexual misconduct that got him thrown into jail. God had given him the ability to interpret dreams so he could gain the favor of the Pharaoh. God had been with him. Joseph used the talents and abilities God had given him to do the best he could in each situation. Joseph may not have understood how God would use such evil to accomplish God's plan for his life, but God did and Joseph accepted it.

We may not understand how God brings good from the evil in the world, especially right now. What we can do is trust that God is in charge, ask for God's guidance and, then, and let me emphasize this, then we are to do our part. We are to take action.

Take action. I once belonged to a health club that had tables outside in front for people who need a break from exercising. Every morning a group of retired men would gather there to discuss the troubles of the world. I sat down with them a couple of mornings to hear what they were talking about. I asked them once what they were doing to address the problems they were discussing. The answer: nothing. All they did was gather to complain. That's not taking action.

We are to take action, to be compassionate – to see the need and take action to alleviate the suffering. We are to love as Jesus loved us. We are not to sit on the sidelines. We are to use the talents and abilities God has given us to follow what God is leading us to do.

Let us pray:

Word of God, Living Word, Word made flesh, trusting your promise to give us the words and believing your Word does not return to you empty, we are bold to speak in your name. We rebuke evil. We proclaim love. We call out hate. We pursue reconciliation. We stand with the oppressed. We pray for all. We seek your will always. We refuse to be on any side but yours, no matter the cost. Even as we recognize sin and death, we anticipate life and resurrection. In the name of One who came to save the world. Amen. (Our words and God's Word: A reflection on Charlottesville, Presbyterian Outlook, August 14, 2017 by Jill Duffield)