

In preparation for writing a sermon, I will sometimes go back to read a previous sermon I wrote on the same scripture passage. Sometimes I do that when it feels like the context of the scripture needs to be explained and I look to see if I can re-use an explanation that I had already written rather than recreating those words from scratch. Sometimes I re-read an old sermon to remember what I have focused on in the past in order to concentrate on something a something different. This week I took a look at the sermon I preached on Matthew 18:15-20 and I was a little surprised by what I discovered. Before I read the sermon, I remembered that I had planned to talk about the portion of the scripture that addresses conflict resolution but that I ended up talking about something else instead. I couldn't remember that that something else was or why I made that decision.

It was September 10, 2017 and it was the week of natural disasters. Hurricane Irma had left a million people in Puerto Rico without power and was about to hit Florida. An 8.1 magnitude earthquake struck off the southern coast of Mexico resulting in the deaths of 61 people. Massive fires were burning across the western United States and by the end of the month, over 1.3 Million acres would be burned. Instead of using the scripture from Matthew, I focused on a different text, Romans 13 that talked about love.

So back to this week. It is the second week of Lent, but since we cancelled church in the building last Sunday I had planned on treating this Sunday like the first Sunday of Lent. We are using the scripture from last week and beginning a sermon series called "Are You Kidding?" which looks at the scriptures for each week of Lent through the lens of having faith like a child. I was going to focus on verses 15-17 specifically and talk about healthy communication habits in family and church systems. That was my plan. But I could not stop thinking about the attacks at Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday. I resisted changing my plans for a long time. For one, I had spent quite a bit of time preparing for the original direction of my sermon. And two, it seems like every week presents an opportunity to respond to something terrible and evil. From the resistance of our government to address climate change in a meaningful way to the refusal to process asylum requests, there is an opportunity every week examine the systemic sin of the world and preach the ways of God's love in response.

Then I noticed a post on Facebook from a colleague that said something to the effect of it being the task of Christian pastors to not only pray this Sunday for the victims and the loved ones of the Christchurch terrorist attack, but to condemn work to bring an end to white supremacy and white nationalism. I also feel like I preach against white supremacy on a somewhat regular basis, but the violence of this week warrants the attention. Especially when it is put in context with other attacks – Tree of Life Synagogue, Mother Emanuel AME Church, Oak Creek Sikh Temple, Overland Park

Jewish Center, Islamic Center of Quebec City, not to mention to the personal violence that is done to our siblings of color on a daily basis.

We are in the season of Lent which calls us to a time of self-reflection, confession, repentance, and change. Before I entered seminary, that term repentance made me bristle. It reeked of fire and brimstone preachers who use the fear of hell to convince people to become Christians. Then I learned more about the ancient Greek word “metanoeo” which gets translated as “repent.” Metanoeo means to change one’s mind or purpose. Some commentators translate the concept of repentance as changing one’s way of thinking, a re-orientation of one’s life in a way that puts God and God’s ways at the center. Repentance means acknowledging those parts of our lives that don’t align with the way God would have us live and then changing our lives in order to follow in the ways of Jesus. This concept of repentance not only makes more sense to me, I find it inspiring. I believe we are called to not only repent as individuals, but as a community and as a society. We see this in the Lord’s prayer – “forgive us OUR sins.”

What better time than Lent to repent the sin of white supremacy? While each of us individually may not feel that we have ever supported white supremacy and have of us have even taken some action against white supremacy, when we continue to see attack after attack in the name of white nationalism, we must continue to speak up.

It is dangerous for us to think that because we live in out-state Minnesota, in a county that is 95% white, that we don’t have a role to play or that white supremacy doesn’t exist here. Only two hours away, in Duluth, exists a chapter of a hate group called the Proud Boys who are known for their white nationalism and misogyny.¹ But you don’t have to go to Duluth or the cities to witness white supremacy in action. It was not that long ago that anti-muslim speaker Usama Dakdok was invited to speak at a local congregation here in Brainerd. And while Dakdok is not white, his message feeds a notion of Christian supremacy that is rooted in white supremacy.

Our Lenten series calls on us to play with the idea of what it means to have faith like a child. This week, I think that means seeing everyone as a child of God, regardless of skin color, or religion. In verse 17 of our text this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that if you can not reconcile with someone who has sinned against you through healthy channels of communication, then treat them like a tax collector or a gentile. At first this might sound like Jesus is saying “treat them like an outsider, cut them out of the community.” But if we think about how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors, we remember that he healed them, he ate with them, he ministered to them. Jesus calls on

¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

us not to see people who are different from us as the other, but to continue to seek relationship and reconciliation.

Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” So maybe having faith like a child is reminding ourselves and others that hating people who are different is an invention of grown-ups. If we are truly to follow in the ways of Jesus, we must go back to a childlike state of appreciating difference instead of vilifying it.

We all have opportunities to denounce white supremacy. It sneaks in to conversations with coworkers and neighbors and even our families. We see it in the opinion pages of the local newspaper. I have the opportunity this week to write a column for the religion section of the Brainerd Dispatch. I always struggle with what to write about in this column as I try to find a balance between offering a message that other a majority of people of faith in our community will resonate with and offering a prophetic message of radical inclusion and affirmation. I am currently feeling called to speak out against white supremacy and anti-muslim sentiments among Christians. So I ask for your prayers church. Because I know this may result in some hate mail. I will certainly be praying for you in this season. That we will all find the strength and the courage to do whatever we can to put an end to the virus of white supremacy that is infecting our world and killing God’s beloved children.

Let us close with this Muslim Prayer for Peace

In the Name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful: Praise be to the Lord of the Universe who has created us and made us into tribes and nations that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. If the enemy incline towards peace, do thou also incline towards peace, and trust in God, for the Lord is one that hears and knows all things. And the servants of God Most Gracious are those who walk on the Earth in humility, and when we address them, we say, "Peace."²

² <http://www.worldhealingprayers.com/6.html>