

Singing: This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Yesterday morning, 50 or so clergy from different faith traditions silently walked arm in arm in front of Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia. Their silence a stark contrast to the hate-filled chants of Neo-Nazis and other white supremacists. The clergy, armed only with stoles and collars, lined up along the curb in facing militant white supremacists armed with hand guns and assault rifles, quite literally putting their lives on the line. They stood there, silently bearing witness. Their mere presence a protest against racism and white supremacy. And then a single voice broke the silence – “This little light of mine...” the rest of the clergy joined in “I’m gonna let it shine.”

The night before, torches lit up the faces of hundreds of young white men as they marched through the University of Virginia Campus chanting old Nazi chants like “You will not replace us” and “Blood and Soil” as well modern chants like “White lives matter.” The torch-lit march could have been a scene from the Jim Crow south. Like an angry mob preparing for a lynching. They reached the statue of Thomas Jefferson where 20 or so UVA students held a sign that read “UVA Students Act Against White Supremacy.” The torch carrying mob completely surrounded them and after a few minutes fights began to break out. But the violence that erupted that night was relatively minor compared to what took place on Saturday.

I became aware of all of this while scrolling through Facebook Friday night. The Rev. Traci Blackmon, who is the UCC’s Executive Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries was streaming live video with the title “This is crazy, the KKK is out.” I watched Pastor Traci as she described what was going on. She had been part of an interfaith gathering at St. Paul’s Memorial church less than 1,000 feet away from the torch-lit march. The gathering was a prayer service in preparation for the White Supremacist Rally that was scheduled in Emancipation Park the next day. Hundreds of people filled the church to sing, to pray, and to hear a word of God’s love. The service was interrupted when police informed organizers about the violent presence of white

supremacists and those in the church were advised to evacuate. Pastor Traci's video was filmed from the back seat of a car as she and three others left the church to make their way back to their hotel. The video showed that after police arrived to break up the fight at the statue, the white-supremacists dispersed but many were walking the nearby streets carrying bats and guns. Throughout the video Rev. Blackmon says repeatedly "the hoods are gone." Unlike the KKK of years past, these folks, mostly younger white men, were not hiding behind masks and hoods, but instead were wearing khaki's and polo shirts. She commented that these men looked like they could be your coworker, or your classmate. Her voice shook in disbelief at the scene outside the car window.

So when I woke up Saturday morning, the first thing I did was get on Facebook to see what the situation was in Charlottesville. I watched the scene unfold through the live video of Rev. Blackmon's cell phone. I learned that she would be doing an interview with Joy Reid on MSNBC and turned on the television. Minutes into the interview, someone in her security detail whisks her off camera as she shouted "I gotta go, I gotta go!" Moments later hundreds of white supremacists marched down the street and fights broke out. We were informed that they were using billy clubs, pepper spray and brass knuckles as they attacked anti-racism protestors holding black lives matter signs.

Minutes later, a white terrorist into the peace-full crowd assembled to be an antidote to the hatred he was there to spew, injuring 19 and killing Heather Heyer who was trying to cross the street.

Church, my heart is heavy and I am weary of the tension and violence that seems to escalate week after week. It's too much! How many of you are feeling also this way this morning? On Tuesday, the President announced that threats from North Korea would be met with "fire and fury like the world has never seen."¹ As the week unfolded tensions between the US and North Korea only grew as threats flew back and forth between the leaders of our two countries like insults on a playground. This was originally going to be my focus for this morning. But as news unfolded yesterday, it became clear that the message from this pulpit needed to be a strong and clear

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/us/politics/trump-north-korea.html>

denouncement of white supremacy and the proclamation of the message of our faith – that we are all created in God’s image, that nothing can separate us from the love of God and to remember the words of Jesus: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16).

I want to share with you a statement written by the Rev. John Pavlovitz. I was originally going to simply pull a few quotes but as I read it over and over I decided to simply share it in its entirety...

What we’ve watched unfolding in Charlottesville, with hundreds of white people bearing torches and chanting about the value of white lives and shouting slurs, is not a “far Right” protest. When you move that far right, past humanity, past decency, past goodness—you’re something else.

You’re not a supremacist, you’re not a nationalist, and you’re not alt-Right.

This is racism. This is domestic terrorism. This is religious extremism. This is bigotry. It is blind hatred of the most vile kind. It doesn’t represent America. It doesn’t represent Jesus. It doesn’t speak for the majority of white Americans. It’s a cancerous, terrible, putrid sickness that represents the absolute worst of who we are.

No, naming it won’t change it, but naming it is necessary nonetheless. It’s necessary for us to say it—especially when the media won’t, when our elected leaders won’t, when our President won’t. It’s necessary to condemn it so that we do not become complicit in it.

This is our national History being forged in real-time, and to use words lacking clarity now would be to risk allowing the ugliness off the hook or to create ambiguity that excuses it. And yes, there are all sorts of other ways that racism and privilege live and thrive; ways that are far less obvious or brazen than tiki-torch wielding marches. There are systemic illnesses and structural defects and national blind spots that we need to speak to and keeping pushing back against, and we will. But in moments that are this clear,

when the malignancy is so fully on display—we'd better have the guts to say it.

White people especially need to name racism in this hour, because somewhere in that crowd of sweaty, dead-eyed, raw throated white men—are our brothers and cousins and husbands and fathers and children; those we go to church with and see at Little League and in our neighborhoods. They need to be made accountable by those they deem their “own kind.” They need to know that this is not who we are, that we don't bless or support or respect this. They need white faces speaking directly into their white faces, loudly on behalf of love.

Though all of us can eventually trace our lineage back to oneness, all carrying a varied blood in our veins—the surface level differences matter to these torch-bearers. They value white lives and white voices above anything else, and so we whose pigmentation matches theirs need to speak with unflinching clarity about this or we simply amen it.

So I'm saying it.

We are not with you, torch-bearers, in Charlottesville or anywhere.

We do no consent to this. In fact we stand against you, alongside the very beautiful diversity that you fear.

We stand with people of every color and of all faiths, people of every orientation, nationality, and native tongue.

We are not going to have this. This is not the country we've built together and it will not become what you intend it to become.

So you can kiss our diverse, unified, multi-colored behinds because your racism and your terrorism will not win the day.

Believe it.”²

All day yesterday, I felt myself shifting back and forth between outrage, deep sadness, helplessness, despair, hope, fear, and determination. Two years ago, I stood in this pulpit and spoke out against the sin white supremacy in response to the murders of 9 black folks in Charleston, North Carolina. In that sermon I said, and I quote, “This

² John Pavlovitz, “Yes, This Is Racism,” *Stuff That Needs to Be Said*, August 12, 2017, <http://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/08/12/yes-this-is-racism/>.

sermon cannot be the last time we talk about this. This worship service cannot be the last time we pray for God's guidance in this work. Unfortunately, today will probably not be the last time we lament the deaths of people of color due to a culture of racism and white supremacy." We have talked about racism and white supremacy a few times since then, but the events of this weekend have added fuel to the fire in by bones. Friends, if you think that racism and white supremacy is only a problem in the South, you aren't paying attention. The racism in Minnesota may not be as in your face but it is alive and well. I have seen with my own eyes a truck in Brainerd that flies the confederate flag from the tailgate. I have heard from some of you about neighbors and friends who have espoused racist beliefs. I recently learned that a booth at the Dakota County fair was offering confederate flags as prizes. These examples are extremely minor compared the systemic injustices faced by people of color in this state and in every state of this country.

I confess my own complacency in this sin of white supremacy. I, as well as all of us born with white skin, benefit from the results of systemic racism and white supremacy. In most cases these benefits aren't visible or obvious to us in the same way that water is not obvious to a fish. It's the environment in which we live. And yet we must not remain complicit. I am guilty of getting impassioned about fighting racism and white supremacy when something like the events of the last 48 hours calls my attention to it. And then my comfortable life moves on and I focus on something else. This is white privilege in action. In his book, *Soul Matters: Antiracist Theologies in Dialogue*, author Rev. James Cone states; "Talking about how to destroy white supremacy is a daily task and not just for consultants and conferences. If we talk about white supremacy only at special occasions set aside for that, the problem will never be solved. People of color do not have the luxury of just dealing with racism in church meetings. If that were the case, it would not be so bad! No day passes in which blacks don't have to deal with white supremacy. It is found everywhere—in the churches, in seminaries, at publishing houses, in government, and all around the world. There is no

escape. If whites get tired of talking about race, just imagine how people of color feel.”³

With all that is going on in the world and in our white house, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and succumb to our anxieties and fears. To allow depression to overtake our spirits and to feel helpless to do anything about what is happening around us. But this morning I am finding hope in this quote from the Jewish Talmud - “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

So, in the words of Harvey Milk, I am here to recruit you! Our first step to fighting racism is to understand our own role in it; to learn about white privilege and the ways we can reject it. I am making a commitment to you, with all of you as witnesses, to organize and lead an educational series that was authored by multiple experts including The Rev. Traci Blackmon and the President and General Minister of the UCC, the Rev. John Dorhauer called “White Privilege: Let’s Talk – A Resource for Transformational Dialogue. On Sunday September 17, if not before, I will have a plan for offering this resource in our church. But I need your commitment too. I need you to commit to doing this work. To either attend that series or to seek out your own education. Part of my commitment to you is to collect recommendations for reading and other learning options. We white folks must commit to not remaining silent in the face of racist comments even when those comments come from family and friends. We must commit to supporting each other in this work. I know that for some of you, the concept of white privilege is uncomfortable and difficult to understand and you might be saying to yourself right now – this a bunch of baloney. I don’t have privilege as a white person. And if that is you, I invite you to come and learn anyway with a spirit of curiosity and openness.

Church, each of us bears the light of God within us. That light that reminds us that we are loved. That light that connects us one to another. That light that is unique to

³ James Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin,” in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 13.

each of us and yet also shared because it comes from the same source. That light that might feel small and insignificant. In times of fear and anxiety we might feel like we need to protect our little light from the dangers of the world; that we should cover it up so that it isn't in danger. But flames need oxygen. That light burning inside of you will only be made brighter when you refuse to let hate, or racism, or even threat of war dim your light. The world needs a little more light right now. Our combined lights are no match for even the biggest torch-carrying mob. Our combined lights are stronger than our fears. The light of God is always with us and will not leave us in darkness. Amen.