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A Summer Mini-Series: Paul Said *That??* 2. Even *Them?*

Romans 10:9-15 NRSV ...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." 14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

I have had a great deal of trouble this week trying to truly believe these words from the Apostle Paul when he says "*the same Lord is the Lord of all.*" The title of this sermon – "Even *Them?*" – that I announced weeks ago today seems particularly prescient and particularly troubling in light of what we all saw happen in Charlottesville and which has been on our hearts and minds all this week. Paul says "*there is no distinction*" between "*Jew and Greek.*" But what if we extend that thought to say that there is no distinction between hate-filled mostly young men brandishing clubs and torches and spewing the vilest of un-Christian and un-American slogans and those clergy and lay-folks who faced off with those who would pervert the gospel and the American dream armed only with Bibles and singing? Obviously, we need to dig deeper because it would be too easy and too wrong and much too odiously over-simple to say that there is no distinction between the two groups, two groups that offered starkly different visions for both the faith and the country, two groups whose points of view are not confined to Charlottesville but represent a struggle and a decision that is for every Christian in every part of this land that we love, this faith that has claimed us and gives us life.

Last week, we closed our worship service by singing “To Us All, to Every Nation,” the magnificent hymn written by poet James Russell Lowell in 1845 during a time of national strife. Some of you may know it by its older title, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” and its opening line surely, surely describes what is our opportunity and our obligation now: *“To us all, to every nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side.”* The line of that hymn that is haunting me this morning, though, is this: *“Some great cause, some great decision, Offering each the bloom or blight, And the choice goes by forever, ’Twi’x that darkness and that light.”* I am just young enough (now there’s a line I don’t get to say very often anymore) to have missed the opportunity, in the name of Christ, to have gone in the 1960s to Selma or Memphis or Birmingham and stood alongside those who were protesting the now-obvious evils of state-enforced segregation and discrimination and the state-sanctioned customs that led to 4700 lynchings¹ and countless African-Americans being denied their right to vote or to have a trial by jury that wasn’t a sham. But I have often wondered what I would have done.² Would I have had the courage, in the name of Jesus who is my Lord and Savior and who was a brown-skinned Middle Eastern Jew, to put my body, and mind, and attitudes on the line for that righteous and Godly cause?

If you have wondered the same thing, then you and I both need to know that that opportunity and obligation is again before us. All over this country, there are over 900 groups classified as hate groups.³ And too many of those use the name “Christian.” Many of the Charlottesville rioters – who deliberately carried torches and clubs to hearken back to those nighttime lynchings – said that they were “Christians” and were

¹<http://www.naACP.org/history-of-lynchings/>

²Cf. Rev. Derek Penwell’s “If You’re A Christian, Now Would Be A Good Time To Live Like It” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/if-youre-a-christian-and-nobodys-ever-asked-you-to_us_59949364e4b056a2b0ef028b . Penwell raises a similar question.

³<https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

seeking to make America a “Christian” nation again. But here is the truth: they have heretically hijacked that name. They have captured Jesus and turned him into something He is not. Their vile posturings are helping turn the under-40 generation away from the church in record-breaking numbers. They celebrated the murder of a young woman who was holding a candle that was no match for an automobile turned into a deliberate deadly weapon. My friends, Lowell’s words are right: we face an opportunity and an obligation to confront and denounce such heresy lest “the choice go by forever.” It is the same opportunity and obligation that Abraham Lincoln spoke of in his Gettysburg address, for tragically, the battle he spoke of still continues: *“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether [our] nation or any nation [conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal] can long endure.”*

Yet I keep coming back to Paul’s words – “the same Lord is the Lord of all” – with its clear implication that God loves even those who pervert the Gospel so awfully and that therefore I am called to love them too. How do we do that? Why should we do that? In this time where indeed moral outrage and action is required – “lest the time go by forever, twixt the darkness and the light” – how do we behave as ones who both know that Jesus loves us and that He loves a whole of lot people who do vile and odious things just as much as He loves us? Well, with some trepidation and hopefully some measure of humility, let me offer five things that we can and should do as Christians after Charlottesville.

The first is **confession**. Every good and authentic and life-giving action, every courageous statement against hatefulness needs to begin with confession. The great 20th century theologian and ethicist Reinold Niebuhr once said *“No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of [others] as it is from our standpoint.”* In other words, we all have logs, as Jesus put it, in our eyes. Even as we rightly confront and

denounce the racism, anti-Judaism, and homophobia that Charlottesville exemplified, we will only have the moral standing and integrity to do so when we first recognize our own racism, anti-Judaism, and homophobia. We need to confess to God that we have sometimes participated in these very sins and without confession we run the risk of becoming as shrill and self-righteous as those whom we would confront in love.

Second, we must make sure that **such confession never immobilizes us or causes us to hide behind the lie that says that because all people are sinners, all are sins are therefore of equal weight and impact.** No. That is the adult version of the childhood taunt “Yeah, but you’re one too.” Yes, the counter-protesters in Charlottesville were no doubt imperfect people with their own sins and their own mixed motives and their own foibles and flaws. But that cannot **ever** mean that there is a moral equivalency between them and the neo-Nazis who came with murderous intent, 80% of whom (according to Virginia’s Governor⁴) were armed with semi-automatic weapons and who cheered when people of faith were hurt and killed, who carried signs that said “Jews are Satan’s Children,”⁵ who sprayed Mace on a worshiper leaving the synagogue after Sabbath prayers and who blocked the front door of that synagogue with armed men shouting the same slogans that sent Jews to death camps and against which my father fought and some of you in this room fought. In other words, there are indeed degrees of sinfulness and not to acknowledge that or to claim a false equivalency of sins is to aid and abet thuggery, murder, and mayhem.

Third, there is an old saying worth recovering, so long as we appropriately understand it: “**Hate the sin and love the sinner.**”⁶ Now, that saying has become not

⁴<http://www.businessinsider.com/virginia-gov-mcauliffe-defends-charlottesville-police-better-semiautomatic-guns-white-nationalists-2017-8>

⁵<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8351/god-is-love-and-love-wins>

⁶I’m grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for reminding me of the aptness of this saying for this sermon!

only cliched, but tarnished in its power as it has too often been used by folks to give a disingenuous “welcome” to LGBTQ folks whom they claim to love even as they “hate” the alleged sinfulness of their purported “lifestyle choice.” This, of course, is nonsense since virtually all reputable scientists now understand that sexual orientation is a biological given not a “choice.” But we should not lose the power of the saying despite that misuse of it. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr., was getting at in his 1967 speech, “Where Do We Go From Here?” Listen to his words:

Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate through violence. Darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that. And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems.

Now, sometimes that word “love” sounds all squishy and smarmy and we wonder what real power it has. Well, King goes on to say this:

And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate.... and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.... [For] John was right, God is love. [The one] who hates does not know God, but [the one] who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.⁷

You see, that “strong, demanding love” is the very kind that Jesus showed. He loved tax collector Zacchaeus but expected that he change his evil ways. He loved those money lenders in the Temple but threw them out because their sinful usurious actions defamed God and hurt the poor. He even loved Judas while decrying the act by which Judas betrayed Him. Loving the sinner never means ignoring the sin; it simply means that you will not allow hate of other people to corrode you and poison you and strain

⁷<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2131>

your own relationship to the God Who is indeed love. When Paul says that Christ is “the Lord of all” that indeed should cause those who do evil to quake in their boots, for the Lord whom we follow is one whose love for all means that He expects righteousness of all.

Fourth, each and every day pray to God that you will **continue to have the capacity to be surprised by goodness and by joy**. That can be a hard thing to do sometimes. Catholic writer Jim McDermott says this: “But if we are not going to turn away, overwhelmed and exhausted, how are we to sort through this constant barrage of information and raw emotion? How **do** [we] continue to ‘bear witness’ when every three or four days there is another crisis?”⁸ Well, he commends to us the Jesuit practice of ending each day with prayer and then asking God this question: “Where were you today, Lord [and what] do you want me to notice?” *What do you want me to notice?* I am convinced that the only way we will retain the energy for our continued witness against hatefulness is to notice those signs of goodness, those signs of joy, in our lives – even amidst the deluge of awful things. Did you notice the smile, the laugh, of a child today? Did you see how the flowers are riotously blooming after all our monsoon rains? Did you savor the exquisite richness of a Palisade peach? Did you notice that elderly couple holding hands? Without the disciplines of noticing a daily dose of joy and goodness, our lives will turn overly earnest and sour – and that will make our walk with Jesus so much less than it could be and sap our energy for continuing to confront the things He calls us to confront.

Fifth and finally, remember: **love does win. Love wins**. A preacher by the name of Adam Thomas writes these powerful words:

I urge you, I implore you that when you see the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

⁸<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/08/16/charlottesville-and-trump-sp-iritual-exercise-overwhelmed-and-exhausted> Emphasis mine.

employed in such... hateful and ignorant way[s], you take a stand.... Don't worry if you think you don't know enough about the Bible or faith or Jesus. You **do** know enough. You **know** that Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves. You **know** that Jesus welcomed all people to himself, especially those marginalized by society at large. You **know** that he commanded us to pray for our enemies. You **do** know enough. You know that God is love, and love wins.⁹

Love wins. Indeed. ***But you and I can help it win.*** Not with torches of hate but candles of hope. Each time we confess our own sinfulness, each time we take a stand for God's justice through our words and our actions, each time we refuse to give in to corrosive hatred of other people even as we may rightly hate what they do, each time we notice the God-given joy and the goodness in our lives, then we will have helped just a little bit to bend that moral arc of justice that Martin Luther King also spoke of towards God's appointed end. So, as Paul says elsewhere (Galatians 6:9 NASB), "Let us not lose heart in doing good." For indeed, indeed, our God is the Lord of all and has promised that one day every knee will bow towards that love and every heart will, as the old hymn says, turn towards the right.¹⁰ For that good news, that very good news, thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8351/god-is-love-and-love-wins> Emphasis mine.

¹⁰"We've A Story to Tell to the Nations," <https://hymnary.org/hymn/CH1995/484>