

Soul Talk – A Pastoral Letter for Sunday, August 13, 2017

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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

“Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-29

Freed for Joyful Obedience.

Friends in Christ,

Every year, we take our son, Aaron, on a three-day trip that includes the opening day of the Iowa State Fair to celebrate his birthday. Every five years we host a birthday party for him when he can invite anyone he wants. This year was his 40th birthday. Time to party.

We don't usually keep up with the news when we are on Aaron's birthday tour. This means we did not pay much attention to the news until Deb and I were on our way home to Webster City Saturday afternoon.

We had talked how it was that Aaron's birth happened the same week as Elvis Presley's death. Then she picked up her cell phone and read the newsfeeds about what happened in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Aaron's future birthday celebrations will now cause us to remember the violence in Charlottesville. We pray this remembrance will also include a turning toward healing and hope rather than violence and death.

A major factor in our healing and hope as persons of faith and citizens of the United States and the world will be some very hard looks at ourselves.

I pray you stick with me in the pages ahead. It's my take on the difficult journey ahead of us. For Deb and me, as it may be for you, this is very personal.

The violent and deadly events that unfolded on Charlottesville's streets was no accidental happenstance.

It was an intentional and willful act of evil cloaked in a particular and peculiar form of righteousness.

White nationalist supremacy movements have a long-standing way of using Christian Scripture with twisted apocalyptic interpretations to create a vision of a purified race of people who are destined to rule over all other races of people by violence, bigotry, hatred, and death. "It's in the Bible, so it must be true," they have said.

It was encouraging last night to read of national elected officials, Republican, Democratic, and Independent, who named what happened yesterday for what it was: ***an act of domestic terrorism by white nationalist supremacists.***

I would add to this description. The act in Charlottesville could easily be called, "Christian extremist terrorism," in the same way attempts are made to name other forms of domestic and world-wide terrorism as "Islamic extremist terrorism."

If naming what happened in Charlottesville as an act of "Christian extremist terrorism" seems offensive to us faithful Christians, then we can understand how faithful people of other religions, including Islam, feel when their beliefs are perverted by supremacist nationalist movements as righteous justification for violence, bigotry, hatred, and death.

It is a historical fact in the years leading up to World War II that the white nationalist movement called "Nazism," which violently advocated racial purity by the persecution and systemic genocide of persons of the Jewish faith, persons with mental illness, persons with developmental disabilities, and LGBTQ persons in Germany, largely occurred because of the silence of the German Church.

This is where it is personal for us.

All of the persons condemned by Nazism and white nationalist supremacists by their religious beliefs are today persons who we know and love. They, like Aaron who is a person with developmental disabilities, are persons of our family, our neighbors, our friends. They are you and me, when it gets right down to it. And, when it gets right down to it, I am angry for the twisted and sick way nationalist supremacists use Christianity and other religions to justify their sick agenda and ensnare good and faithful people with fear and prejudice.

It may be difficult to understand, but I see a connection to what happened in Charlottesville to the way in which we, as a nation and state and local community, have been steadily dehumanizing each other, especially when it comes to persons of other races and faiths, persons with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities, and in our debates about human sexuality.

Underneath our de-humanization of each other lie our jealousies, envies, and strife, almost always fed by economic factors of biblical proportions.

We may not, and hopefully do not intend this, but the spill-over effects of our actions and rhetoric cannot be contained so neatly as we might desire.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others, gave witness to the Christian faith opposing these evils cloaked in righteousness at the cost of their lives. The payment of their lives was geometrically increased by the payment of the lives of many of our relatives and friends of many different faiths, races, and ethnicities of the United States and our allies who fought side-by-side in World War II and in many wars and conflicts since to free us from this evil.

As I watched the videos of the violence in Charlottesville last evening, I was taken back to my childhood and early teen years. I recall watching the black and white television coverage of white nationalist supremacists (KKK and others) with their intentional, willful, and peculiar forms of violence, bigotry, and hatred.

I recall how they quoted Christian Scripture and verse for justification.

I recall how some brave people spoke up; but I also recall the way in which the silence of some good people supported the white nationalist supremacists' beliefs and actions, including the silence of much of the church of Jesus Christ.

To be truthful, sometimes the support was not so silent.

Today, therefore, we also must realize how particularly pervasive this evil still is.

This evil comes in many forms with new justifications.

It attempts to work its way into our daily thoughts and actions.

It then becomes something we practice without knowing how it was that it came into our lives and how it still clings to us.

It clings most to us in our times of weakness and in our frustration, in our anger at others.

We perpetuate it.

We enhance it.

We pass it on to others, especially our children and children's children.

We give this ancient evil a new way of being, still using Scripture to justify both the means and the ends.

And then, more times than not, we only become aware of our participation in this evil after the fact.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that the German Church's soul had become sick with it; and the only physician the German Church had for the healing of its soul was Jesus Christ.

For Christians today, this means we are moved beyond the condemnation of others to the confession of our own sin-sick souls and the sin-sick soul of the church in our complicity with this evil.

I invite you to pray with me.

Let us confess, as the ancient prayer of the church reminds us:

***Merciful God,
We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done your will,
We have broken your law,
We have rebelled against your love,
We have not loved our neighbors,
And we have not heard the cry of the needy.
Forgive us, we pray.
Free us for joyful obedience,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹***

God's forgiveness freeing us for *joyful obedience* is more than a good feeling.

This *joyful obedience* is the willful and intentional action for another person's well-being in the same way God willfully and intentionally gave of God's own self in Jesus Christ for our well-being and the well-being of all the peoples of the world and all of creation.

This was Jesus Christ's *joyful obedience*. Look upon the cross and know what Christ did, intentionally and willfully, once and for all, for you and me and all the world and all its people.

Joyful obedience is living out the Great Commandment, ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.***

In times like these, ***joyful obedience takes a whole and holy host of courage and it is very personal.***

Joyful obedience is living the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹ A Service of Word and Table II. The United Methodist Hymnal, ©1989 The United Methodist Publishing House.

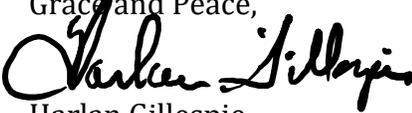
I believe and know you to be people of deep faith.

It will be the depth of your faith and mine and the faith of others, a faith that only comes as a gift of God, that shall lead us by *joyful obedience* to the vision of God's Peace given to us by the prophet Isaiah and Jesus Christ (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, Isaiah 11; *The Sermon on the Mount*, Matthew 6, 7, and 8; and other texts).

We must walk this way together, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Freed for Joyful Obedience.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harlan Gillespie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "H".

Harlan Gillespie