

“HATE IS NOT JUST ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW”

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

We hoped it was overly dramatic that 35 of us gathered on an evening last February to watch a documentary on how the church responded--but mostly failed to respond--as racial hatred and violence became mainstream in Weimar Germany. We hoped equipping ourselves in this way was an overreaction. But it was not.

Recent events in Charlottesville show the evil of racial and religious hatred have morphed into forms socially acceptable to those in our nation's highest counsels. As that occurs among leaders set over us, people from below must speak clearly. That is happening from leaders of business councils, from military leaders on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, even from MVP Kevin Durant of the Golden State Warriors.

We at First Congregational Church add our voices of those refusing to stay silent. We join with other churches in condemning acts of domestic terrorism such as unfolded in Charlottesville. We consider them anti-American and anti-Christian. They are evil and we unequivocally reject the ideologies and strategies of hatred.

We pray that we will brook no quarter for racism in any form. We pray for Heather Heyer's family and for every injury sustained in the conflicts. We also pray that in responding to hate, we will not become hateful ourselves, perpetuating the cycle. We pray for all who clash to realize how much violence only fuels greater hatred.

Such talk isn't about posturing to feel righteously good about ourselves. Rather, we speak out recognizing that all evil needs to gain an upper hand is for those resolutely opposed to it, those of us passionate about 'never again,' to stay silent.

Our film last February told of Reverend Martin Niemoller, a pastor who was a key leader in the Confessing Church, practically the only resistance the European church offered to Hitler's self-deifying persecution of so-called undesirables. But Niemoller was honest about how slow he was to come around to actively resist.

Niemoller, who was jailed, later lamented and wrote, "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Like Niemoller, many of us are shocked to be dealing with virulent racism when a few years ago we hoped we were becoming something like a post-racial society. Weren't we finally becoming civilized? Wasn't progress in America a real thing? It even felt like we might leave behind America's original sin of slavery and racism.

But the illusions of what modernity calls progress are usually contradicted by the intractable persistence of human nature. Like gardens need water, sun, and air to thrive, people need three things to become the creatures God intended. We need the identity, community, and meaning we find here at FCC. From these three ingredients, life purposely issues forth in ways to make life worth living. But nature doesn't tolerate a vacuum. When souls aren't rooted in a healthy community with Christ at the center, things can quickly trend in darker directions through the politics of contrived victimhood, phony pride, and scapegoating politics of blame.

Christian Picciolini, a former skinhead and founder of *Life After Hate*, now spends his days combatting this very real surge in white nationalism across America. He writes, "I believe the whole world has now seen what we've been sweeping under the rug for many, many years, 1) that it is a problem, a real problem, that exists in our country; 2) that white extremism should be classified as terrorism, and as we attach the terrorism word, it will get more resources and move up as a priority."

"What we need to understand is that since September 11, more Americans have been killed on American soil by white supremacists than by any other foreign or domestic group combined by a factor of two. Yet we don't really talk about that. Nor do we even call the shooting at Charleston, S.C., or what happened at Oak Creek, WI, or at the Sikh temple, or at Charlottesville this weekend--as terrorism."

We can feel exiled in our own land. I must say, watching these events unfold in a foreign land—we were in Scotland last week--contributed to its bizarreness. White supremacy says you have your ideas, and your votes, and we have ours. Returning to the office, Dennis Hanlon said of this modern mindset, "Whatever happened to good and evil, right and wrong? All that language is missing here."

Dennis has a point. Much of what we used to process in houses of worship now gets mediated through the popular political online culture of dialogue and debate. The electronic public square of partisan exchange is the new forum of identity, community and meaning occurring before in churches, synagogues or mosques.

But the American covenant can't handle good and evil like religious covenants can. What we see as so obviously evil gets conveniently rationalized with familiar ideas like victimhood that were already noxious weeds in our society before this.

In the racism of the mostly white men at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, they've carefully crafted in their minds that they are victims. Not only is their perceived victimhood the basis of convincing themselves that what they say and do is not racist. Victimhood is how they rationalize their lashing out. As they see whites discriminated against, they see themselves as heroically doing something about it, standing up against the abrogated rights of whites. They feel they are being stigmatized for their pride as white people. It is not just their self-esteem—another sacred cow of modernity along with victimhood—that is at stake. As they see their struggle as one of survival, violence is further rationalized. Isn't it ironic

how the civil rights verbiage gets flipped for the opposite purpose? Isn't it striking how inadequate modern constructs like victimhood, self-esteem and tolerance are? These virtues are compelling only for those who don't believe in very much.

All this shouldn't surprise us. Evil never conquers souls and nations by thumping its chest, saying "I am evil, and I will own you, as I bring you misery and death." Evil is more calculated and subtle than that wearing helpful or wholesome guises.

I recently read of Adolf Hitler's 1923 trial for treason against Germany. Did you know he was found guilty? With verdict in hand, that judge could have locked him up for decades. Untold misery and death would have been prevented. So why didn't it happen? During the trial, Hitler was allowed an oration of two hours. He waxed on and on in patriotic tones about his deep love for Germany and family. The judge and hearers were impressed. His sentence was reduced to less than a year. In prison he wrote "Mein Kampf," "My Struggle," telling of the slights, insults and hurts he had faced. It is always the way of bullies in bullying to pose as victims, accusing real victims of bullying. Jesus says, you'll know a tree by its fruits.

This scandalizes some, but it is at the heart of the Biblical message: we worship a God who takes sides. The most compelling narrative in the Old Testament is Moses leading Israel in their exodus from slavery out of Egypt. How does that happen? Yahweh had heard the cries of his people. Yahweh doesn't do an equivalency here, "Like, Pharaoh, tell me your point of view...Now Moses, let me hear your case." One is the oppressor, and the others are the oppressed. One is the crusher, and the other the crushed. And God visits plagues on the tyranny.

We remember this story and lift it up today as new terrorists seek their legitimacy. Living amid our democratic pluralism, we too easily forget that hate isn't just another point of view among other points of view, and deserving of its own hearing. Hate defies God's holy ways as it aggrandizes itself and destroys human life. Saying anything less is a false equivalence. We should never, ever forget that.

We must speak against it or we become complicit with it. Silence is compliance. We are back where we started and I want to end here so I can come down there where you are to hear a few comments or questions from the people of God. Amen.

Benediction

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with a holy anger toward injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

— A Benedictine Prayer