

August 19, 2017
Rev. Curran Reichert FCC

“Forgiveness”

The year was 2000, the place was University of Philadelphia and the event was called “WOW” (Witness our Welcome). It was a gathering of all the LGBT welcoming denominations across the US and Canada and it was the first of its kind. There were thirty-four denominations present, including membership from Church of the Brethren and the Catholic advocacy group called Dignity.

It was a challenging conference as the majority of leadership on this issue had up to that point been white, middle class and majority male. The “welcoming” movement had to do some serious wrestling with internalized division and that was not what the event was prepared to do, but that is a story for another day.

I got a call from Rabbi Steve on Friday afternoon to say that members of Shir Shalom were feeling quite vulnerable in the wake of the events in our country this week. He asked if I had seen the images of people holding rifles and shouting outside of a synagogue in Charlottesville, VA as the congregation gathered for Shabbat.

I was immediately transported back to the Witness Our Welcome opening worship service on a sweltering hot summer night in downtown Philadelphia- the city of brotherly love. As clergy and lay people arrived to the steps of the historic church, we were met by throngs of anti gay protestors holding signs that told us we were going to hell, they spit and threw things at us as we clamoured to get inside the sanctuary.

I had never seen, let alone experienced anything like it. Additionally, because the city was experiencing rolling black outs, the power was cut off and fumbling in the dark with chants of hate pounding at the door, the leadership of this conference on unity was scrambling to figure out how to proceed.

Over the years I have seen similar, if not more hate filled crowds gathering to protest the Ordination of the Gay Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson, gathering to protest the opening of Open and Affirming congregations, gathering in support of proposition eight. I remember a former parishioner at Tiburon telling me not to worry about proposition passing, "Don't get yourself all worked up he said, after all this is California." But we lived in Oakland at the time just below the Mormon temple and on our drive home each night we had to cross through an angry crowd (that included children) shouting about "family values and the preservation of their freedom."

As a white woman of privilege, I have often been told by other white people of privilege not to **overreact**. As I listened to Steve on Friday, I heard his concern that we may not **reacting** enough. I think we should take his concern very seriously.

Congregation Shir Shalom has invited us to stand in solidarity with them on Friday night for Shabbat service and I hope to see all of us there. I hope we will spill out of the sanctuary and onto the streets holding candles and spreading love. I'll bring the candles you bring your friends.

When I hung up the phone with Steve, I went to the web to find an HBO documentary I'd heard about. It is called Charlottesville; Race and Terror- twenty minutes long and I recommend everyone watch it. But before you do you will have to prove that you are not a minor. You see what is happening on the streets of our own country is not fit for children to see; actions taken by people who live in this country against people who live in this country. Angry, angry people screaming "Jews will not replace us. F*** you faggots. Blood and soil, take back our land."

Nazi flags, torches, guns, knives. A car ramming into a group of tax paying citizens killing an innocent young peace activist- Heather Heyer, injuring people and traumatizing an entire crowd. Culminating a words from our 45th president equivocating Nazism with people who stand against white nationalism. No, this is absolutely not an America that is fit for children to see. I can't help but **react** to that.

Michael Eric Dyson has written an op-ed in the New York Times this week in it he says: *Now is the time for every decent white American to prove he or she loves this country by actively speaking out against the scourge this **bigotocracy** represents. If such heinous behavior is met by white silence, it will only cement the perception that as long as most white folk are not immediately at risk, then all is relatively well. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, and nothing could more clearly declare the moral bankruptcy of our country.*

Today's scripture text is about forgiveness, Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery with the Egyptians. He does so for two reasons. He forgives them because they are finally willing to be held accountable for their actions, and because what they intended for his destruction God has transformed into common good; Joseph will save his people from starvation.

Heather Heyer's mother said this week that white supremacists intended to silence her daughter's voice of protest and what they have done by killing her is **amplify** that voice. But she has still lost a child and the person who ran her daughter over and drove away has yet to express willingness to accept responsibility for his actions.

Forgiveness without contrition is a tall order.

Perhaps that is what Miroslav Wolf was talking about when he wrote that, "Forgiveness comes sometimes in droplets, in bits and pieces."

Last week I said that any good we try to do in this world must be accompanied with a fair bit of humility because we can never fully know another person's story, we can never fully understand why people do what they do. What we can do is strive to understand what motivates us.

Last week I wasn't ready to respond to what had just happened in Charlottesville. I was having trouble wrapping my mind around what **had** happened. I might have also felt unwilling to open up the pain I have experienced to a much lesser degree in similar situations.

You see, I have been schooled to respond rather than to react and as a general rule of thumb that is a good one and yet **a reaction** to racial injustice, bigotry and hatred in this country and in this county, is long overdue.

Back in that chapel in downtown Philly, those of us inside the church had to find a way forward, just as those of us inside this church must also do.

We chose to celebrate the presence of God within and among us, just as we do here today. We chose to sing about peace and pray about our pain, we heard scripture about forgiveness and a sermon about standing up for justice. Seventeen years later, the task we face this morning is disquietingly similar to the challenges of that day.

By the time our nerves had calmed and our service had ended we tenuously reopened the doors of the church. Much to our wonderment the signs of hatred and voices of disdain had been muffled by sweeter tones and signs of support. The people who worked in stores and lived on streets nearby had seen what was going on and they had a reaction. They erupted with a spontaneous outpouring of encouragement. Their signs said, "You are beautiful, you are welcome here, we stand with you."

Like Joseph did with his brothers we embraced and wept on one another's necks.

Forgiveness sometime happens indirectly. **Sometimes we have to stand in for one another when it comes to forgiveness.** Stand in as allies, stand in as people who are willing to hear and help heal the hurt, even if we weren't the direct cause of it.

Remember with Joseph forgiveness took over twenty years to come to fruition. Droplets of kindness, bits of hope and pieces of forgiveness- those are the openings to be watching for this week.

Amen