

Charlottesville

By

Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

August 20, 2017

“You...will not...replace us! You...will not...replace us!”

These were the words that neo-Nazis, members of the KKK and White Supremacists chanted on the campus of the University of Virginia a little over a week ago. The marchers, carrying torches reminiscent of a protest in Germany in the 1930's, were approximately 750 strong.

Who are the people they were referring to as ‘you’? I suppose it was anyone who did not look like them and share their ideology. At times they singled out Jews and other ethnic and racial minorities.

Why do they think this way and shout these hate-filled, intimidating words? Evidently, they feel they know more than anyone else and have all the answers to the mysteries of life and faith.

As a result, they believe they are entitled to control their communities and ultimately the country, which means getting rid of anyone who is not like them or disagrees with them. Diversity leads to weakness in their world view.

How do you think it makes people feel who do not look like them or share their opinions and beliefs? I think it is safe to use the word, threatened, especially when those shouting at them are carrying guns and talking about killing anyone who gets in their way.

What happens when people who feel superior to everyone around them are confronted by people who disagree? We know the answer to this question based upon the

videos we have seen coming out of Charlottesville. A toxic environment quickly grew volatile. Hatred exploded into rage, and people were terrified, injured and killed.

How do you think God feels about all of this? I suspect God cried all weekend and is still crying. Why do I believe this?

Do you recall what Jesus did on Palm Sunday when he rode the donkey into Jerusalem? He paused on the Mount of Olives and looked down upon the Holy City, a bustling city filled with Passover worshipers going about their business inside and outside the Temple.

What did Jesus do? He cried...uncontrollably. Tears were not trickling down his face. He was heaving.

I'm not sure I have ever seen the Grand Marshall of a parade cry unless he or she was shedding tears of joy. Jesus' tears were not tears of joy but disappointment and grief.

Speaking to the citizens of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, Jesus said, "If you, even you had only known what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes." Jesus went on to inform those around him that a day was coming when their beloved city and Temple would lie in ruins. (Luke 19:41-44)

Yes, God, like Jesus, cries when we refuse to pursue justice and live by the Golden Rule. God aches each time we choose hate over love, exclusion over inclusion, arrogance over humility, greed over generosity, self-indulgence over sacrifice, hurting over healing and revenge over forgiveness.

So, where do we go from here? Like you, I have pondered this question all week. Let me put some suggestions on the table.

Don't make a bad situation worse. Do not become the monster you want to get rid of. Refuse to take up guns and clubs and resort to violence. Everybody loses when you do this.

To paraphrase MLK, Jr., "An eye for an eye causes everybody to go blind."

Remember whose you are. We are Jesus' disciples.

Everything we say and do must honor Jesus and not embarrass him. This is not a time to take matters into our own hands, but to make ourselves available to the Lord's service and to be the presence of Christ in the midst of chaos and confusion.

Taking our cue from Jesus...

...it is a time for weeping. Jesus cried overlooking Jerusalem because his heart was broken and crushed. Even he struggled to put into words what he was feeling and let his tears do the talking for him.

"Blessed are they that mourn for they will be comforted" was directed not just to those who experienced loss, but also to those who were so disturbed by the widespread corruption, exploitation, selfishness, greed, violence and bloodshed they were witnessing that they cried over the human condition.

Surely you have been moved to tears by what you have seen and heard in recent days. If you have the mind of Christ, your heart has to be burdened and heavy.

...it is a time for praying. This problem is bigger than we are and can escalate out of control quickly. We need God's help.

Pray that God will raise up leaders and statesmen and stateswomen for such a time as this.

Pray for our current leaders by name, national and local, and ask God to open their eyes, hearts and minds to the gravity of the situation and to grant them wisdom, understanding, guidance and courage.

Pray that God will guide and direct you as you interact with people in the coming days so you will reflect the heart and nature of God in all you say and do.

It is God's voice and vision the world needs in these confusing and fearful times. Ask God to help you be a faithful ambassador for Christ.

...it is a time for being angry. The Bible speaks of righteous indignation. The events in Charlottesville call for a righteous indignation displayed at times by the prophets and Jesus.

When I watched the video of the Friday march in Charlottesville, I was disturbed to the point of anger. It brought back a vivid and startling memory.

For almost thirteen years, Jackie and I lived on the east side of Atlanta in the beautiful and historic area around Stone Mountain. We enjoyed our time at the church and in the community. It will always hold a special place in our hearts.

Stone Mountain is not just known for its beauty, though. It is also the home of the modern day Ku Klux Klan. The first of many rallies was held on top of Stone Mountain in 1915.

In 2009, I received word that many Confederate sympathizers were going to assemble near Stone Mountain to honor their heroes. I went to the gathering out of curiosity and stood off in the distance.

Some of what I saw on television last week and heard in interviews that followed reminded me of the things I heard that evening in Stone Mountain. I recall walking away from that event sick to my stomach and angry, much like I felt last weekend.

How can we continue to be so self-absorbed, insensitive and cruel? I wish I had an answer.

...it is a time for speaking and listening. This is not a time for silence.

Jesus was not timid! He spoke openly and boldly about evil and its devastating consequences. Often, he described evil as corruption, the abuse of power and the mistreatment of others.

Jesus had zero tolerance for any of these. This is why he became the champion of the least, the last and the lost and an advocate for those who were victims of hate crimes and unfair decisions on the part of the powerful.

We must adopt Jesus' cause and become his voice, which will make our country better. What occurred in Charlottesville last weekend was not just unbiblical but also un-American. Nowhere is the hate-filled rhetoric we heard on the campus of the University of Virginia reflected or condoned in the high ideals of our constitution.

All of us, leaders and citizens alike, must speak with one voice and clearly send a message to the world, and every element of our citizenry, that we repudiate racism, bigotry, intolerance and violence. It is imperative that we stand openly for the biblical principles of equality, justice and respect for all.

I urge you to denounce any individual or group who seeks to undermine the values taught and modeled by Jesus and to demand that those in positions of leadership set the standard by being good role models.

Make your voice heard and your opinion known. This is not a time to be shy or ambivalent.

Furthermore, every leader in our country must make room at the table where decisions are made for all our citizens to come and tell their stories so their needs can be addressed. When you put a name, a face and a story with an issue or a decision it changes everything. Freedom rings when stories are shared!

For 48 years, I have been listening to the stories of church and community members, and I am much different than I was before I took the time to listen.

48 years ago, I was absolutely certain about many things. I am now absolutely certain I was wrong about many of them.

It is one thing to make a decision in a vacuum. It is another to make that decision when you are looking at someone with tears flowing down their cheeks who will suffer the consequences of what you and others decide. You may make the same decision, although I doubt it, but whatever you decide, your heart will be broken and you will walk with them down the path toward hope and healing.

It is a time for speaking and letting the world know as Jesus' disciples we believe we are all God's children, no one has a corner on truth, diversity is a strength, we are wiser when we listen to one another's experiences and perspectives and in our society, no one is to be left behind.

No one is to be left behind. This was a major theme of Jesus' ministry that he taught and modeled.

Mark 10:46-52 describes an encounter Jesus had with a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus. Everyone tried to silence Bartimaeus as he shouted for Jesus' attention the day Jesus passed through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem.

Jesus refused to ignore Bartimaeus and called for people to help him to his feet. To the dismay of everyone, Jesus interrupted his teaching and journey to heal Bartimaeus.

What message did Jesus send the large crowd of Passover pilgrims surrounding him? The task of his disciples was to hear the pleas for help others ignore or try to silence. Followers of Jesus call the forgotten to the front of the line so their stories can be heard and their needs addressed.

No one is to be left behind!

Luke 7:36-50 tells of the time Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon. While dining with several other religious leaders in Simon's home, a woman of ill-repute entered the courtyard and anointed Jesus' feet.

Evidently, it was not the first they had been together. It appears she came to Simon's house to express her love for and gratitude to the one who had been kind to her, offered her forgiveness and showed her a better way forward.

In spite of her sincere and pure motives, she created a disturbance that angered Simon and his other guests. They used this moment to humiliate her and discredit Jesus.

Jesus, on the other hand, very tenderly received her demonstration of love and gratitude and boldly protected her from the rude and angry words the Pharisees directed toward her and him.

What was Jesus' point? This shunned and shamed woman was as important to Jesus that night as all the powerful people around the table. As long as he was there, she was welcomed in that place and had nothing to fear.

No one is to be left behind!

In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus was again passing through Jericho when he spotted Zacchaeus, a tax collector, sitting in a sycamore tree. It appears Zacchaeus was as beloved in Jericho as Ebenezer Scrooge was in London or Mr. Potter in Bedford Falls.

Jesus stopped and call Zacchaeus by name. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today," Jesus told him.

Zacchaeus' life and standing in the community were radically changed that afternoon because Jesus refused to ignore him as most people tended to do.

No one is to be left behind!

Luke 15 describes three parables Jesus told: the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. What do they have in common? Something or someone was lost and out of place, which was unacceptable to the owner or the father. All three were eventually found or returned home due to the efforts and prayers of those who missed them, leading to great celebrations.

How do these three parables speak to me? If I was the only person in this world lost in a dangerous and scary world, God would have still sent Jesus to earth to find me and bring me home.

No one is to be left behind! No one is unimportant, inferior or disposable. All of us are God's beloved.

Another theme Jesus embraced in his ministry was inclusion. This is why Jesus made circles of friends everywhere he went and worked hard to tear down the barriers people erected between them and those who were different.

Look at where Jesus went and what he did as God's representative and an agent of change. He traveled through Samaria, told the story of the Good Samaritan, talked to the woman at the well, touched lepers, healed a Roman Centurion's servant and called people who had nothing or little in common--fishermen, a tax collector and a zealot--to be his disciples. The evidence of God's Spirit in Jesus' heart and theirs was their ability to live and work together in harmony.

Jesus was always bringing people together, as Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, often reminded his students. When asked "Where is God?" Buber would simply reply, "God is between people."

Isn't this where we need to be now?

Jesus never saw a barrier between people he liked. Neither should we.

From this time forward, we must reach out to people who are different from us and interact with them.

We must share meals in our homes and invite them to be a part of our circles of friends.

We must open the doors of our church to them and welcome them into our fellowship, much like Jesus did for Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus, and the woman who anointed his feet at Simon's home.

When they have a need, we must be the first to respond with acts of kindness and words of encouragement.

If you want to honor Jesus this week as his disciple, love the people who come into your pathway. Ask for their name. Inquire about their family. Offer a compliment or word of

encouragement. Listen to their story. Ask them what they would like you to pray for on their behalf before you go to bed.

Why? We are all God's children and we'll either flourish or perish together.

On Sept 11, 2001, a man fell while running from the World Trade Center. He looked behind him and saw the buildings collapsing and smoke billowing.

He was in shock and unable to move. Another man stopped and knelt beside him, offering aid and comfort. He carefully helped this man to his feet with encouraging words and a strong hand. Both fled to safety.

What was so unusual about this? One was a Pakistani Muslim, and the other was a Hasidic Jew.

This is the kind of world I want to live in.