***WHO ARE YOU?***

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Texts: Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 8:26-39

Just one year ago today we sat in these pews and prayed for the nine members of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC who were shot and killed by white supremacist Dylann Roof as he shouted racial epithets at them. As you may recall, Roof shot them in hopes of starting a race war so great was his hate for African-Americans, even for those African-American Christians who had welcomed him into the church for Bible study and prayer that day. The nation was horrified at the violence, but as Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center notes:

*Since that terrible day, our country has made progress in removing the symbols of hate…[*[*b]ut*](http://donate.splcenter.org/page.redir?target=https%3a%2f%2fwww.splcenter.org%2fnews%2f2016%2f06%2f17%2fcharleston-shooting-anniversary-more-work-remains-end-extremist-violence&srcid=310323&srctid=1&erid=53270284&efndnum=12020504085&trid=54e9d1dc-d689-44e6-ab8b-6723947fd579) *we’ve made precious little progress in addressing the substance of hate — the underlying fears and anger that divide us.*

The events of last week confirmed those words. Last Sunday we prayed for the victims of the shootings at a gay club in Orlando, FL – 49 young men and women killed and 53 injured by a young man whose hate was violently vented against gay folks, most of them Hispanic, who had done him no harm. His claim of allegiance to ISIS in the midst of his killing spree revealed his hate for America as well as for the gay men and women he murdered. Then Friday in England a bright young member of parliament was shot and stabbed to death by a man who allegedly shouted, “Britain first!” in the midst of his attack, a reference to a far-right group that stages provocative anti-Muslim demonstrations and opposes membership in the European Union. As one English historian commented in the Newshour Friday evening, “Some people just don’t like the French or the Germans and don’t want to be in a club with them. They haven’t liked them since the 13th century and their not about to start liking them now!” Sometimes such hate seems to go beyond any national borders or individual attributes and is directed to the whole world as those of us in this part of the country recall in the terrible shootings at Virginia Tech just a few years ago.

Our world seems to be flooded with a tidal wave of hate –hate for the “other” who is not just like me, anger toward whole classes of people because of their race or religion or sexual orientation or political perspective. Such hate lurks in the extremes of our global society, but also rears its ugly head in the mainstream when an American presidential candidate wants to ban all Muslims from entering the country and suggests that the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II was justified, and when an Arab leader vows to wipe Jews from the face of the earth. It is hate fueled by fear and prejudice, insecurity and resentment of “the other”, whoever “the other” might be. It is hate that all too often finds expression in violence, discrimination and demonization of whole groups of people. What possesses humans to act so inhumanely?

It might be tempting to look for an answer to the story of Jesus’ confrontation with the Gerasene demoniac, and attribute modern hate-filled actions to the continuing work of that legion of demons that Jesus cast out by the Sea of Galilee. It was, after all, those demons that recognized Jesus as an enemy while persecuting the naked man who lived among the tombs. Are humans possessed to act bizarrely, unjustly or even violently because they are possessed – not their true selves, but incited by a demon to act out? Comedian Flip Wilson used to say, “The devil made me do it.” Does that explain the lone gunman who kills as many people as he can or the suicidal terrorist who looks for public places to take her own life and the lives of as many others as she can?

There are certainly instances in which mental illness or emotional instability causes individuals to act in bizarre or violent ways toward others or toward themselves. In days of yore before such illness and conditions were identified and understood, their actions were attributed to demons. But those are more the exception than the rule in the kind of hate crimes and phobic rhetoric we hear about these days. Perhaps a more likely source for such mean-spirited actions comes in that story of the Gerasene demoniac from the actions of the people who witnessed Jesus’ casting out the demon and healing the man. For, after seeing that miracle with their own eyes and seeing the healed man in his right mind and hearing the amazing things Jesus had done, the people responded not with praise but with fear. As Luke tells us:

*All the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear.*

Imagine being so fearful that you send away One who could cast out a demon and heal a man possessed and calm a storm. Imagine being so fearful that you send away Jesus!

It is fear that is at the root of much of the violence and hate that afflicts our world, fear of “the other” who we cannot control, fear like that of the crowd who wanted Jesus to go away and leave them alone. God knows we are fearful creatures. “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid,” says Jesus, for he knows that we are prone to fear and he knows what fears can do. They can entice a crowd to send him away and a faithful disciple to deny even knowing Jesus; they can lead religious leaders to crucify a messiah out of fear for their own positions of power.

“Do not be afraid,” he says again and again, and yet we are still afraid – very afraid in a world that preys (with an e) upon our fears instead of praying (with an a) that our fears would be eased. Morris Dees urges:

*As a country, we must push back against the rhetoric of fear and resentment – the demagoguery that puts a target on the backs of LGBT people, Muslims and others in minority groups.*

That is his call to us as a nation, but what is our call as Christians in the face of so much fear? “There is no fear in love,” writes John, “but perfect love casts out fear…Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:18, 20-21)

John recognizes that fear and hate are too easily entwined, and so he calls us to fight fear with love, to fight hate with love, to fight prejudice and division and racism with love, because love is at the heart of our Christian faith. It begins with God’s love for all of us – black and white, Christian and Muslim, gay and straight, old and young, American and Iranian, Palestinian and Jew, Republican and Democrat, male and female. All are created in the image of God and are loved by God, and for that reason alone we are called to love one another despite all our differences. The differences remain, but we are to love one another across them.

In writing to the Galatians Paul was aware that there were concerns about the differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The burning question was whether Gentile Christians needed to follow the law as Jewish Christians did. In responding to them, Paul uses the analogy of a *paidagogos*. The *paidagogos* was a household slave who was responsible for the moral behavior of a young boy of the household; he led the boy to school and generally supervised his conduct to protect him from bad decisions and immoral influences. “The law was our *paidagogos* until Christ came” writes Paul. But now that Christ has come we are no longer bound by the law as our custodian or moral protector. We are children of God in Christ whose moral compass is now oriented toward the teachings and life of Jesus. It is in him that we have our unity and our identity.

Our fundamental identity is not in any of those ways in which we are different from one another – Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female. Our fundamental identity is in Christ, as children of God in Christ. That was Paul’s point to the Galatians and to us. We are not first and foremost Americans; we are children of God in Christ. We are not first and foremost Republicans or Democrats; we are children of God in Christ. We are not first and foremost black or white, Hispanic or Asian, gay or straight, Hoos or Hokies; we are children of God in Christ. And because we are children of God in Christ we are called to love one another – to love all the others, regardless of how “other” they are as Jesus showed us by loving a possessed Gerasene – a Gentile – enough to heal him and grant him new life. Any other identity that trumps that identity in Christ is idolatry. But if your fundamental identity is as a child of God in Christ, then it will be hard to hate others who are also children of God created in the image of God, and it will be harder to fear – to fear the others we know and the others we don’t know – for we know God is with us and will never ever let us go. Speaking to her grandfather’s killer in Charleston, Alana Simmons bravely decreed, “Hate won’t win!” To which we say, “Amen!” Hate will not win, for God will win and God is love.

In his wonderful book *At the Loch of the Green Corrie*, set in the Highlands of Scotland, Andrew Grieg writes of asking his fishing buddy if it was hard to settle back home after living in South America. His friend replies, “There comes a point when it’s a matter of who you decide to be.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Who will you decide to be when you decide to be who you are? You are a child of God in Christ, an heir to the promise, a disciple of one who loved you and died for you and saved you and calls you not to fear, not to hate, but to love. Brothers and sisters, embrace that identity. Conquer the fear, conquer the hate, dare to live faithfully, joyfully, hopefully in the face of that fear – doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with the God who walks humbly with you and with me and with everyone else each and every step of each and every day! Hate won’t win! Fear won’t win! For, God wins – and God is love! Amen

1. Andrew Greig, *At the Loch of the Green Corrie*, Quercus: London, 2010, p.40 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)