

“Struggle for the Beloved Community”

May 22, 2022

Scripture: Psalm 130; Micah 6:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:16—6:2

When I heard about the massacre at Tops on Jefferson last week, I was confused and devastated. And as the news came out about who had done it and why, I was mortified. I reached out to a couple of friends who live and work on the east side. I asked one, a pastor colleague, if he knew of any vigils being planned. He responded, “This is not the season for vigils, we must come together and build the beloved community that God has ordained us to do. I am so angry.” That sounds like a mixed up response, but I can relate to it.

We can’t deny our anger over what happened. It was horrendous and heart breaking. And as another colleague pointed out last Sunday at a prayer vigil, we’re not innocent in all this. The only reason a person was able to find a place where a large number of Black people were certain to be gathered is because Buffalo is a segregated community. We’ve been told over and over that the Tops store resides in a “food desert” but that implies it’s somehow natural. Others have started calling it a “food apartheid,” an area where services like good grocery stores are intentionally excluded. In a five mile radius from where I live, I can count four major supermarkets, as well as a Target and a WalMart, both of which sell groceries. We created the conditions, through red-lining and under-investment, that made Saturday’s massacre easy to carry out. There’s good reason to be angry.

And I’ll never understand the depth of hatred that motivates someone to do something so horrible. We have a tendency to assume mental illness is the cause, but as another colleague at a different prayer vigil I attended the other night points out, that explanation only helps further stigmatize mental illness. There’s a sickness behind what was done, but I’m not convinced it’s bio-chemical. The real sickness is the ideology behind that person’s actions. This idea that white people are in danger of being replaced by people of color and that people of color are somehow inferior to white people, that’s the real sickness. What kind of society have we built where a person can become so convinced of such nonsense that they would actually take up firearms to prevent it? And how do we unlearn the lessons of racial hatred we’ve been teaching ourselves for so long?

I’ve recently been reading a couple of resources that are helpful. The first examines our country’s 400 year history of white supremacy that has created what Isabel Wilkerson identifies as a caste system. In her book titled *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Wilkerson, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, digs deeply into our history to uncover how this system has been established, beginning with the enslavement of African people, and how it’s maintained through an intricate construction built on what she calls “eight pillars” or beliefs. She writes about them, “As these tenets took root in the firmament, it did not matter so much whether the assumptions were true, as most were not. It mattered little that they were misperceptions or distortions of convenience, as long as people accepted them and gained a sense of order and means of justification for the cruelties to which they had grown accustomed, inequalities that they took to be the laws of nature.”

As I read her book I hear my soul crying with the psalmist, “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.” Our society’s long history of racial injustice and hatred has driven us into a darkness where all manner twisted thinking is allowed to fester and grow and from which all manner of atrocities are committed. We cry out for rescue but we haven’t been willing to do what’s needed to move toward healing. We keep thinking this is a problem that will work itself out if we just ignore it long enough. Eventually God will fix things for us. But this is not some condition that’s out of our control. We have agency, we can change our thinking and our actions. If we wait passively for God to change us, we’ll never move toward becoming the beloved community.

Another important resource I’ve found is the book *White Too Long* by Robert P. Jones. Jones is a statistician who founded the Public Religion Research Institute. The Institute tracks attitudes and trends among different religious groups, mostly Christian, across the country. Jones starts his book with a story about the recurrence of anthrax in Siberia during the summer of 2016 when the permafrost thawed because of climate change. The anthrax had been living in the carcasses of reindeer that had been killed in an outbreak in 1941 and were buried beneath the frozen tundra. When they rose to the surface during the thaw, the pathogen rose with them just as virulent and deadly as before. Jones uses this story to illustrate how racism was brought to the surface of our politics that year through the Make America Great Again movement. Recently the Institute has been surveying attitudes among white evangelicals and Catholics about race, and the findings are disturbing.

While we tend to think of racist attitudes as regional and confined mostly to the south, in fact they can be found everywhere. Jones writes, “Particularly in the Northeast, holding racist attitudes has become a strong differentiator between white Christians and white religiously unaffiliated residents; those holding the strongest racist attitudes are more likely to feel at home with either white mainline or Catholic Christians, as compared with religiously unaffiliated whites. The data suggest that white Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have served as institutional spaces for the preservation and transmission of white supremacist attitudes.” Has that happened through our failure to speak out against racism and white supremacy or through our active promotion of it, or some combination of both? (Think of these books as “where we are” and “how we got here.”)

When the 8th century prophet Micah, speaking on behalf of Israel, asks God what should be done, what act of contrition must be performed to regain God’s favor, the answer goes beyond rituals and words of doctrine, all the right prayers and songs: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” If we want to know the path toward becoming the beloved community, then we need to focus on doing justice, for those who have been wronged and those who have been left out, and loving kindness toward those whose lives have been diminished because of policies and practices that have benefited white people and done damage to people of color. And most of all, what the whole idea of white supremacy denies, we must learn to walk humbly with our God. That means abandoning the privilege that leads to arrogance. It means listening to real grievances of those around us who have been left out, listening without becoming defensive and resentful. And it means giving up the lie that says something as arbitrary as skin color, a genetic physical trait, has anything to do with a person’s value.

We've been through a terrible trauma in our community, maybe the worst we've ever experienced. But there are folks around us whose lives have been one small trauma after another because of racism to which we've been completely oblivious. We need to hear their stories; we need to find ways to sit down and hold truth and reconciliation sessions so we finally understand the real cost of our indifference. As Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view." He's telling them to see each other as a new creation and to see that new creation in themselves. That's what the beloved community is all about. It doesn't mean we won't make mistakes or at times fail to live up to our intentions, but when we do we admit it, we confess. And we seek to make it right. That's the struggle for the beloved community. It's a struggle that begins with acknowledging our sin, admitting our complicity in hatred that leads to violence, and then doing what's needed to make it right.

I don't mean this to be a diatribe, and I hope I don't sound angry or accusing. And if I do, believe me, it's directed at myself. I don't know how to fully convey the urgency of this moment. Our Black sisters and brothers are grieving in ways we cannot imagine. The hurt when you go down to that site, that horrible and now sacred site, on Jefferson Avenue is palpable. You can feel the pain and sadness when you go there. We cannot be silent in the face of that. We need to join the struggle for the beloved community. "Now," as Paul says, "is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" We can be released from this hatred we carry, this legacy of caste we've used to elevate ourselves for so long. Friends, let's join the struggle. The beloved community is within our grasp if we are willing to do what's needed to struggle for it. That is our mission and our hope; there is no other path to peace.

Amen