

Some of you know I was in Charlottesville yesterday. To be honest, today I'm exhausted, I'm weary, I'm sad, and I'm so, so very confounded. To be even more honest, I thought long and hard about whipping out an old sermon on one of these texts hoping – trusting even – you all might not remember it. I even had one with an illustration about my pups Ralph and Alice – I know you love those – but they also tend to be the ones you remember, so I thought better of it. Besides, while I am all those things – exhausted, sad, confounded – I'm also hopeful, stubbornly hopeful, because yesterday amidst the hate, the fear, the violence, there was also so much beauty, courage, joy, peace, unity, and love, and it was powerful. So, let me back up and start from the beginning.

About two weeks ago, I saw a press release from a group called Congregate Charlottesville<sup>1</sup> asking for clergy from outside the city Charlottesville to please join them in standing in solidarity with community members – community members shaken by what is happening in their town instigated largely by outsiders intent on spewing a message of hate and fomenting discord and division. The request was to come and visibly counteracting the message of hatred with a message of love by proclaiming that “God rejects white supremacy and by showing that God is present with those hurt, angered, afraid and confused” by the rallies organized in their midst. I put it tentatively on my calendar, going back and forth as to whether I would go, feeling conflicted and uncertain if added presence there would be helpful or just raise the profile of these hate groups.

Then early last week, our Bishops Shannon, Susan and Ted, invited Episcopal clergy throughout the diocese to join them in Charlottesville to stand in non-confrontational and prayerful opposition to the rally. In asking us to join them, they wrote, “Our purpose will be to bear visible witness to the entirety of the beloved community in which people of all races are equal. As people who have been reconciled to God through Christ, we have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In our judgment, therefore, the Church cannot remain silent in the face of those who seek to foment division.”<sup>2</sup>

And so I went to Charlottesville yesterday, and what I saw and heard and read of the day was no joke, as we all know from the 3 deaths and countless injuries.<sup>3</sup> These days the white sheets are gone, and hatred walked boldly and blatantly in the streets of Charlottesville – boldly and blatantly. I saw signs that read, “Diversity is White genocide,” and “Jews are satan's

children,” weaponizing Christian scripture by citing verses from the New Testament. Nazi flags were abundant, and many people wore red patches with swastikas on their arms. One man’s shirt read, “Those who want to live, let them fight. Those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle, do not deserve to live,” quoting Adolf Hitler. Chants ranged from the Nazi-racist ideology, “blood and soil,” to “We will not be replaced,” to “The heat here is nothing compared to what you’re going to get in the ovens.” And all of this was bolstered by the sight of multitudes of brandished long-guns and wooden clubs and shields. It was a spectacle meant to do nothing less than to intimidate and, let me be clear, to terrorize...

But Charlottesville refused to be terrorized, and with few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of people reaffirmed their commitment to resist hatred and to continually strive for justice, equity, cooperation, peace, and love.

In the car ride to Charlottesville and again at the gathering for racial reconciliation at Trinity Episcopal Church yesterday afternoon before heading home, Bishop Shannon shared a bit of his story and what it had to do with his presence in Charlottesville. He grew up in Alabama in the 1960s and as a teenager learned that his Bishop at the time was one of the clergy addressed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail (If you have never read the Letter from a Birmingham Jail, I strongly recommend it). His bishop – a bishop of the Episcopal Church – was on the wrong side of the Civil Rights Movement. As Bishop Shannon’s call to the priesthood came into focus, he committed to stand for civil rights and racial reconciliation. As a Bishop, he was further committed to making sure that every person, especially every child, would know where the church over which he presides stands – that this church would not remain silent in the face of hatred, but would stand boldly for equity and unity, for love, reconciliation, and peace.<sup>4</sup>

I was there yesterday because I too want to be clear about where the church stands – that white supremacy has no place in it, that hatred has no place in it, that fear will not gain a stronghold and choke out the vision and the truth of God’s beloved community. I was there because my baptismal vows compel me to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. I was there because doing all of this means engaging in a continual process of self-examination – of succumbing to the work of the Spirit in rooting out and confronting any hatred and prejudice, conscious or unconscious, that infects my own heart,

and it means inviting others to do the same. I was there because we at St. Andrew's, in the midst of our broadly held political and theological ideologies, have continually expressed our commitment to be a place of welcome – of belonging – for all people – and increasingly a place of safe-haven, a sanctuary for those who are vulnerable simply because of who they are.

Not long ago I said that I thought this commitment was going to take increasing measures of courage and selflessness on all our parts. That it was going to mean that we stand up and speak against harassment, acts of hatred and violence, and anything or anyone that denies the fundamental humanity of another person. That it was going to mean standing with those who are susceptible to harassment, and acts of hatred and violence, not just within our community, but beyond, because the power of our witness to the world will greatly diminish if we are one way together as a community and quite another outside of it. I said that this commitment was going to mean remaining intimately entangled with the ways of the world, and yet as un-ensnared by them as God's grace and our intention to love render possible.

In today's Gospel language, this commitment means leaving the comfort and safety of the shoreline, taking the risk to step outside the boat, to withstand the stormy weather, and to resist the impulse to drown in fear by keeping our eyes peeled on Jesus, because God's mission of love and reconciliation is our mission. We are invited to stand with God in holding the space in which life can thrive – all life, not just our own particular version of it. Standing in that space takes courage. There will be stormy weather. But Jesus says, "Take heart. Do not be afraid."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://congregateville.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thediocese.net/news/bishops-re-saturday-march-in-charlottesville/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/12/charlottesville-far-right-crowd-with-torches-encircles-counter-protest-group>; <https://iambeggingmymothertoreadthisblog.com/2017/08/12/my-fellow-white-americans/>; <https://rvamag.com/news/virginia-news/rva-mag-first-look-unite-the-right-in-charlottesville/>

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Shannon gave me permission to share this story. It is abbreviated and written from memory. Any mistakes and misrepresentations are entirely mine.