

Rev. Kelly Ryan

Matthew 5:1-12

Untitled—Sermon in response to Charlottesville Rallies

August 13, 2017

I started out this week with a gathering of 15 other young ministers, pulled together into a cohort to build strong ministers for strong churches well into the future. We shared stories of our ministries bearing fruit from Miami to White Salmon. We learned new ways of looking at church that invite commitment and engagement. We made sure we were planning well for our retirement!

And even though we only were together for a little over two days, we still cried at closing worship like we had all been at church camp. I was just blown away by the talent and faithfulness and heart that these ministers, all under 35, bring to their churches.

We also got to meet some leaders in the church. We met our UCC President John Dorhauer over lunch, and he shared his hopes and vision for the church and those in it in an off-the-cuff ten minutes.

We got to eat dinner with Rev. Traci Blackmon, our UCC Executive Minister for Justice and Witness, who warmly greeted and gracefully built points of connection with each of us that I hope to model in my own life.

And then, 48 hours later, I was glued to an overwhelmed Facebook Livestream from Rev. Blackmon as she was conducting an on-the-ground interview from the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, and suddenly had to be rushed offscreen because their position was in immediate danger.

It is astonishing, isn't it, how our outlook, the posture of our hearts, can change so quickly? I was moved to tears by my hope for the future I saw in these other young ministers around a communion table on Wednesday. By Friday, I felt my stomach turn watching coverage of white supremacists marching with actual torches. The graceful and warm pastor I shared a meal with two days before was now speaking prophetic words to an audience online as she faced down white supremacists with hundreds of other resisters of faith and conscience.

Now, let me be real: I'm horrified by this week. I'm cycling between sad, outraged, and afraid.

This week, we did nuclear tension and irresponsible warmongering. And white supremacists marching, hoods off and torches up, on a college campus. What decade is this?

but you know, at least this time, when I'm calling out white supremacy, it's not "up for interpretation". This is unambiguous white supremacy rallying under Nazi and Confederate flags in the bare light of day. So in some small way, I'm glad they're not beating around the bush anymore, because now we can call it like it is.

White supremacy is toxic. It is weak. It is an anger that reminds me of a wounded animal lashing out when it feels backed into a corner.

This is absolutely not acceptable. It is crucial for people of faith and conscience to condemn this. There is no place. NO PLACE. for this sort of evil in our nation, certainly not in our churches.

We worship, in the words of seminarian Lauren Grubaugh, who was at Charlottesville,

the God who is justice,  
The God who tramples fear and hatred under her feet,  
To the God whose own child's lynched body hung limp on a tree,  
not by her own hand,  
but because of the fear and hatred of those human beings  
who feared the kind of world they were promised would be ushered in  
and hated the changes they would have to undergo to get there.<sup>1</sup>

Black and brown bodies, heck, women's bodies, gay and lesbian and trans bodies, are still subjects of violence because there are some people scared that the onward spread of the Beloved Community might invite them to share some privilege more widely.

This is something we can do in particular as white people—to call out our other white brothers and sisters who might think that this sort of ideology will go unchallenged.

Challenge this. It may feel uncomfortable. If it is, you're doing it right.

Most of us, if we or our family took baptismal vows, are charged to resist and renounce evil whenever we see it. White supremacy, neo-nazism, is brazen, naked evil.

And, to be as clear as can be, it is contrary to the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Grubaugh, Lauren. "A Prayer from the Streets of Charlottesville." <https://allsaints-pas.org/a-prayer-from-the-streets-of-charlottesville-from-seminarian-lauren-grubaugh/>. Accessed August 12, 2017.

It is a denial of the truth of the image of God in each person,  
It is a mockery of Jesus' call to treat others as you would have them do unto you.  
It is a diminishment of the inherent human dignity of each person, and makes access, rights, wholeness and life itself based on something as arbitrary as skin color.

These are hard times. It can feel like the soul of our nation is more and more revealed to be far more diseased than we knew. It can feel overwhelming.

But church, this will not have the final word.

This evil is not the strongest force in our world. This is the ideology of weak, scared people who are afraid that the world is changing and will leave them behind. And, heck, it will.

I hope they can come with us.

But let's not slow down for them.

We have something so much better than the brittle, toxic narratives they espouse.

We follow the crucified Nazarene, who said that the peacemakers are blessed.  
Who said the last shall be first and the first shall be last, so those calling themselves supreme better plan on being at the *very end*.

Who not only condemned systems of injustice, but said that we're not even gonna play that game anymore.

The crucified Nazarene who was executed because some people felt like their power was threatened too much by the forces of beloved community.

Executed by people who felt their ill-gotten power slipping away in the face of the onward spread of the realm of Love.

There's this icon image from the Orthodox church called the Anastasis. This image is from Chora Church in Istanbul.

It means "resurrection" and it recalls a story in the tradition in a vivid, poetic sort of image that Jesus descended to hell, shattered the gates of it wide open, and with the gates of hell and the keys that kept people locked away in hell crushed under his feet, began to pull people from hell. This is a liberation from evil and sin so literally imaged that it takes my breath away.

We follow a Christ who knows what it's like to be in hell, who knows the hellish landscapes of our lives, and who has broken even those places open to liberation and redemption.

When our world seems bleaker and more hellish than we can imagine, this is precisely when liberation is most near.



This is what the resurrection story is all about.

Resurrection is the ultimate destruction of violent systems. It is turning them on their absurd head for the sake of love.

It is telling power that even the worst thing they can do is powerless in the face of God's love.

Resurrection tells the forces of death and evil that love is our life, our truth, our end.

We proclaim that there's a new power in town and it's not liberal or conservative.

It's the kingdom of God,

it's the realm of love,

and it is coming in full force on earth for wholeness and liberation.

Because ideologies not rooted in love and justice do not last.

These ideologies are finite, and they will go down to the dust just like every other time deadly hatred has reared its ugly head and lost.

This will not win—even if the arc is long.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

We stand with love, we are people of the resurrection, and it is powerful.

But it doesn't happen without us.

But we are love's muscles. We must flex and spread and stand up for love whenever we can, incarnate it in the strongest possible terms. Love needs us to be strong right now.

We are the muscles of love.

And we need to build our muscles more these days.

Get stronger.

Get more creative.

Get braver.

It is our call to lean even more into the risk of living fully the revolution of love.

Our allegiance should not be whether our side can be more powerful, but to love as a force that we bring to the pained, angry, violent places in our world.

Dorothy Day wrote that the best we can do is act in the moment we are in right now, and pray for a re-vitalization of love to transform the actions we do in our moment.

So get out there and be the church of Jesus.

Get out there and be the muscles of love.

Get out there and be people of the resurrection.