



ST. PETER'S
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Greenville, South Carolina

August 17, 2017

Dear People of St. Peter's,

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
(*The Book of Common Prayer*, p.305)

This question is set squarely before us at this divisive and anxious time. It is not my question. It is *our* question. The explicit challenge of this question confronts every baptized Christian who understands our covenant with God to include following the example of Jesus.

Let's begin with the easy part. Racism is evil, always and everywhere. White supremacy, white separatism, Nazi, and KKK ideologies are racist and evil, always and everywhere. Faithful Christians have a duty not only to reject the words and deeds of those who align themselves with these groups, but to overwhelm the words and deeds of such groups with a crisp, clear, loud, non-violent repudiation. This does not require any nuance or qualification. It is plain and simple.

Of course, there is hatred, violence, and terror being fomented by other groups, and faithful Christians are also called to reject and repudiate these words and deeds. However, there is a special burden upon white Christians to clearly reject the formerly mentioned groups because those groups have tried (and succeeded many times) to cloak themselves with the legitimacy of the white Christian community. And we have let them do this.

One of the insidious ways that evil becomes more contagious, strong, and dangerous is when the fringe element is able to imply that it is mainstream. There are two contributing catalysts for this dangerous contagion.

One catalyst is when respected leaders condone or even suggest an element of respectability can be found in racist words and deeds. The unabashed racists who organized and participated in the Charlottesville marches are now celebrating the support they feel they have received from our President and other leaders. They feel vindicated. They are emboldened. This is a shame, and there is nothing we can do about it.

The second way the evil of racism becomes more contagious, strong, and dangerous is when respectable people like you and me remain silent. Silence translates clearly as acquiescence. When I worked as a lobbyist one of the most effective ways to move a bill through the legislature was to work with other interest groups before a committee hearing so there would not be any vocal opposition. When there is silence in the committee hearing room, you get your way. Likewise, when there is silence in the public square the noisy ones get their way.

The good news is that we can do something about this.

1. We can be willing to stand up and speak out at times and in places whenever we see or hear racism, or attempts to make racist thinking seem humorous, respectable, or mainstream.
2. We also can be willing to show up and speak out in the public square when opportunities arise.
3. We can contact our elected leaders and ask them to support us and join us in our condemnation.

We are living in a time when the broad Church must be willing to show up, stand up, and speak out in large numbers against those who have used our symbols, identity, credibility, and silent acquiescence to spawn racism, hatred, and violence.

When Jesus was arrested by the Romans the Gospel tells us that the crowds shouted, “Crucify him!” I believe this is true. I also believe that “crowd” is a vague word. Does this mean that every single person in the public square that day shouted for violence against the Prince of Peace? No.

I find it impossible to believe the large crowd at the Passover Festival did not *also* include at least some folks from the thousands of people who were fed by Jesus near the Sea of Galilee; or at least some of the folks he healed in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside; or at least some of the folks who heard him preach in ways that gave them new a renewed faith, hope, and love; or at least some of the folks who heard Jesus teach and joined the disciples in following him everywhere he went.

I don’t believe that all those people who fell in love with Jesus suddenly decided to hate him that Friday morning. It is much more reasonable to believe that they stood by silently as the purveyors of hate shouted, “Crucify him!”

Maybe they were afraid of the angry people in the crowd. I get that. Maybe they didn’t know exactly what to say. I get that. Maybe they thought, “my one small voice won’t make a difference.” I get that.

Here’s the thing. Jesus *didn’t* get it. He literally did not get the voice of his followers. Their silence in the public square translated clearly as acquiescence. The most hateful, violent, noisy fringe element blended in with many silent people and appeared to Pilate, Jesus, the Gospel writers, and everyone else as mainstream.

We must try harder. We must do better. We must strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. We must show up, stand up, and speak out for Christ’s sake.

God bless you,

