

## **“Why are you afraid?”**

**Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 10/28/2018**

A little more than a week ago, my dear friend, Rabbi John Nimon whisked me off to accompany him to the Holocaust Museum in Richmond, and to attend a lecture by former White Supremacist leader Christian Picciolini, author of the recent book—*White American Youth: My Descent into America’s Most Violent Hate Movement—and How I Got Out*. His story as one of America’s first national “skinhead” leaders was poignant and compelling. I read from his opening page on his Prologue: “‘Heil Hitler!’ Spotlights dare to glare through what was once a sacred house of prayer. We were in Weimar, what had recently become ‘former East Germany’ after the wall had come down three years before. Dense stae-fog snaked skyward around me. Like a new dawn rising, I had hoped. ‘Heil Hitler!’ I screamed again into the microphone. Swirling around, feet swinging free in midair, I raised my clenched fist to my band. To the audience it was an amorphous signal of defiance. To my band, it was our cue to begin the next song. Veins were popping on my tattooed arms, sweat gleaming under the lights. The band burst out with the force of a stampeding bull breaking free of its restraints. Music shattering any ancient echoes of holy hymns that had ever harmonized in this stone sanctuary. I was eighteen years old and on a mission to save the white race. My voice filled the room. ‘We’re White! Strong and free! White supremacy! White supremacy! White! We preach the truth! White American Youth!’” Now juxtapose Christian’s story, and don’t gloss over the significance of his name itself, with the museum Rabbi John and I had just walked through—together in mostly silence (which is rare for us), and the finale of which had been recently augmented with painful pictures of Charlottesville, scenes of which included those I had witnessed with my own eyes last year. In silence we rode up the elevator just before Christian’s lecture, and took in the artwork of V.L. Cox who had an exhibit on display on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. We stepped out and into another bold confrontation of systemic racism. V.L.’s art was unrestrained, courageous, and direct. Her art mediums included recycled artifacts and media. As soon as the elevator doors opened we faced a row of old doors, painted various colors, with signs fastened to each: Coloreds Only; Whites Only; LGBT Only; Homeless Only; Veterans Only; Women Only—and then to drive home the absurdity of our hate, a final door with the sign “Humans Only” but this door was wrapped in a series of heavy chains and padlocks. The meaning was clear: We are our own worst enemies. In our hatred we ultimately dehumanize all of us, all precious humans beings.

Remember, just the week before, I had been on a Civil Rights tour through the South with a group of largely local African American pastors, where I had to confront the pain of the roots and byproducts of systemic racism in our nation’s history—at the apex of which I found myself washing the feet of some of our heroes of color who took bold stands in the height of the Civil Rights movement in Lynchburg not too many decades ago. We sat there on the old pews within the walls of the original First Presbyterian Church of Montgomery, an old dilapidated building which had once been the glorious bastion of racist hate, from whose pulpit Rev. Yancey had regularly declared God’s mandate of slavery as a righteous cause, giving way to the secession of Alabama from the United States and ultimate formation of the Confederacy. But here we poured water over these feet of color, feet of bravery, in tears and pain we humbled ourselves as people of privilege and descendants of racial bigotry. Racial hatred cannot find a home in our hearts. Religious arrogance cannot find a home in our hearts. We must be the difference.

As we see in this story of Jesus in Matthew 8, where in the midst of terrifying winds and rains, waves crashing over the bow of the boat, Jesus slept. Is this not how we feel at times. Hatred finding itself

commonplace in our midst, its swells of dehumanization becoming an overwhelming of force, attacking our communities. The attack yesterday on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, 11 dead, more injured, is appalling—and appears this attack was fueled because of the synagogue's advocacy and working with refugees and immigrants—which were called “invaders” by the shooter. And not to forget the two people of color dead earlier in the week, killed at a supermarket in Kentucky because of the color of their skin, only after the attacker was unsuccessful at infiltrating an African American church where worshipers were actively in prayer. This is horrific! And the other 12 or more political leaders targeted with bombs throughout the week because of their ideology. This is abhorrent! And we are overwhelmed, while perhaps we feel God is sleeping. We wonder, “Where is God in this?” “Where is our hope in the midst of chaos?” “Where are you, our Creator, our savior?” We cry out, like the disciples in this story, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

Therefore, we must not forget, then, the second part to this story. Jesus wakes up. In the symbolism of our faith, in effect, it is as if God wakes up. And Jesus' response is one of clarity and comfort. “Why do you doubt? Why are you afraid?” It says then, that Jesus got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. With a simple word, Jesus stopped the calamity. He stopped their demise, their ruin, in an instant. Do we have within us, the fortitude, the desire, the courage, the gumption, to speak such a word as to calm the storm that rages around us. Do we feel we have the power to make a change. I believe we do.

As I listened to Justin Lee yesterday at First Christian Church, the author of the new book *Talking across the Divide*, give a wonderful treatise of why we need to be the difference in a time of polarization in our country, I couldn't help but be reminded of Bev Cosby—our church's patriarch and his repeated message of our role as Christians in our community—we must stand in the gap, we must bring people the peace and unity they so desperately crave. It is on us to help bring about it into existence by first speaking it into existence. We must name it and in so doing we create it—just as Jesus calmed the storm that day—we must not be afraid. Our place is not to fuel further division or hate. We must be the difference, the bridge, the change, the love. It's up to you and me. And begins in our own attitudes, our own words, our own actions.

Our posture must be that of humility and love. The great philosopher and educator Paulo Freire said, “*Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.*” As Freire so importantly highlights, an encounter requires a worldview that doesn't categorize humankind as ignoramuses and sages. Instead, we must simply view each other as human beings, in this together. The former white nationalist leader Christian Picciolini said that what radical racist groups have that people seek is: *purpose, identity, and community*. We must stand together against hate and racism by creating a commonality among us all. We must be the community, identity, and purpose wrapped in love, absolute love and acceptance. In this cause, a cause for basic humanism—a case for the value of ALL humanity, we are truly “in the boat together.” We must in this way, love each other. We cannot, in any circumstances, repeat the tragedies of our own histories. We must do everything in our power to avoid them. We must seek to encounter each other, dialogue with each other, understand one another, and love each other. Friday morning I spoke at length to a local Muslim restaurant owner who shared, while in tears, that he is being driven out of business by

intolerance—that even a local church had announced from the pulpit not to support him because of his Muslim faith. I was speechless, there listening. Is this possible in our community? How does this happen? How do we let it happen? You and I alone hold the key. Put it in the lock, and turn it. Hear the click, don't be afraid. Watch the door open. Don't be afraid. And walk through it. Don't be afraid. Call into existence the future-world you see yourself co-creating with all of us—your community. And don't be afraid. We can do this together. You are not alone.

Peace.