

SERMON

Matthew 14:22-33 | August 13, 2017 | Peter Lane | St. Paul & the Redeemer

On Friday night, hundreds of white nationalists marched at the University of Virginia holding tiki torches and chanting "You will not replace us," and "Jew will not replace us." That is hateful and bigoted. Yesterday, it got worse. David Duke, the former imperial wizard of the KKK said, "We're going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump" to "take our country back." And then Duke criticized President Trump for condemning the violence, even though Trump cowardly refused to single out the white supremacists for denunciation. Well, when you are driven by a vision to mirror the radical hospitality practiced by Jesus, like we are, you sometimes can't see the many sides but can only stand to condemn this bigotry and hatred, not to mention historical amnesia, of these alt-right racists. The truth of the matter is that if the radical hospitality of Jesus took greater hold in our culture then some white men who now have positions of power would be replaced by people of color. If the radical hospitality of Jesus took greater hold in our culture the distribution of resources would change and white men would have a smaller slice of the pie. When they chant, "You will not replace us" do they forget that "the most important pieces of American social policy – the minimum wage, union rights, Social Security and even the G.I. Bill – created during and just after the Great Depression, conferred enormous benefits on whites while excluding most Southern blacks"? (Ira Katznelson, NYT, Making Affirmative Action White Again) Do they forget that slaves helped build the University of Virginia? If these white nationalists were more honest, they would chant something like, "The system of this country is structurally unfair and we get the lion's share of the benefits. Let's keep it that way." "The system of this country is structurally unfair and we get the lion's share of the benefits. Let's keep it that way." Hey! And the bit about Jews not replacing us. The church can not too often admit that the New Testament promoted and the Church

has carried out horrendous anti-Jewish actions. That anti-semitism too must be condemned. Sometimes we must call things what they are. This white nationalism is evil.

One rub for us this morning is that the people marching, carrying Nazi flags and confederate flags and spouting hate, many of them are Christians. And there are many of us Christians condemning them this morning. That is American Christianity. We both read the same Bible. We both pray to the same God. We both invoke God's aid in our struggle against the other. What it means to be a Christian is very contestable. Don't forget that Robert E. Lee was a committed Episcopalian, warden of his church when he died. Many who do evil things are not monsters, but very human. What it means to be a Christian is contestable. It seems utterly unarguable to me that Jesus was on the side of the dispossessed, that Jesus was one who overthrew unfair social structures, that if Jesus were here now Jesus would say that it is wrong how few Black Bishops we have in the Episcopal church, that if Jesus were here now he would say that some white male CEOs should be replaced by Black Women since right now there are zero black women CEOs in the Fortune 500. But many Christians would disagree with me. What it means to be a Christian in America today is contested. We are ignorant if we think that eventually people will see the light and be open to diversity and racial justice. People do not migrate to the good like some kind of magnet. People are formed. Those who put up the statue of Robert E. Lee that literally stands at the center of this weekend's violence probably knew that, they knew they were forming people. They were bending history to their notions knowing they would also bend the future. Some who want the statue to stay say we shouldn't erase history. Well, how differently would generations of people have been formed if the plaque next to that statue would have told the whole history. Something like,

"This statue of Robert E. Lee was erected in 1924, some 60 years after the Civil War ended. It represents not so much his military acumen (he surrendered, after all), but rather the idealization of Lee that became common after Reconstruction as the repressive structures of slavery were being carefully replaced by the repressive structures of Jim Crow. It stands here as a reminder of the lengths to which white people have gone to maintain their power, including erecting this statue to allow a hero to perpetuate the worst in us." If the sign had said that, more people might be asking, "Why do we keep such a strange statue? Is that the kind of people we want to be?"

What kind of people do we want to be? What it means to be a Christian is contested. And the meaning it is given matters a great deal. And so St. Paul & the Redeemer must be in the business of forming Christians who follow the radical Jesus. SPR must form people who will stand up against racism. SPR must form people who will have the courage to not pretend there is a moral equivalency between a white Nationalist and a counter-protestor. SPR must help our people love all that is just and beautiful, good and true, excellent and admirable. And today is a good day to talk about that, because we have a baptism.

Rosemary Luisa will be baptized in a few minutes. And during the examination, all of you will be asked whether you will support Rosemary in her life in Christ. It is easy to blurt out, "We will." Remember that the meaning of Christian in this country is contestable. We need you to act and speak in ways that oppose bigotry and hatred. Luisa needs that from her church, to help form her.

Little things matter. The people who put up that statue of Robert E. Lee knew that. One of the little things we do every week that matters in forming people is that we sing. Let me finish by telling you about Cecil Frances Alexander, two of whose hymns we sing this morning. Alexander was born in Dublin in 1818. She was a poet and a hymn writer. She was part of the Oxford movement, that incredible time of renewal in the Church of England that invited people to greater depth of interaction with the sacraments of the church and a

greater commitment to the poor. That dual commitment was maintained in Alexander's life through her long involvement with the Derry Home for Fallen Women and her efforts at teaching the meaning of the faith through hymns. Our closing hymn, "All things bright and beautiful" was her effort to help explain that part of the Apostles' creed where we say, "creator of heaven and earth." The hymn we began with, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult" is Alexander's interpretation of our gospel passage this morning from Matthew. Remember? The one where Jesus and Peter walk on the water. Alexander's take on the passage is still helpful today. She takes a story from the 1st century and brings it forward into our individual lives. We sang, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea." The tumult of *our* life's wild restless sea. All of a sudden, Jesus is not calling Peter, but calling you, offering you solidarity in the midst of tumult. Take my hand. I know there is real tumult in some of your personal lives. And this week our country faces real tumult. By bringing the story into the present tense, Alexander doesn't make it about believing in a miracle, but rather communicates to us that God offers to be with us in the midst of the tumult. Remember the story.

The disciples are in a boat battered by the waves. Jesus shows up and says the same words he says after his resurrection, "Do not be afraid." Peter then gets out of the boat and starts walking towards Jesus. And please note the timing. Jesus did not calm the storm before calling Peter. What made Peter begin to sink is that he noticed the strong wind. And Jesus saved him. Jesus calls us right through the midst of the tumult of our lives' wild, restless seas. And Jesus says "Do not be afraid."

Let's actively contest the meaning of American Christianity. Let us stand for what is right and name evil when we see it. That probably won't calm the storm. It might make it more tumultuous. But when we begin to notice the strong winds, let's hear Jesus calling, offering a hand, and saying, "Do not be afraid."

Amen.