

A sermon preached on August 18th, 2019 based upon Matthew 5:43-48 entitled "Hate."

Having been away last Sunday, it was two weeks ago that I last preached. The Saturday evening before I was to preach, with my sermon written I tuned into the news and discovered the horror of young man who drove nine hours to El Paso, Texas with the specific purpose of killing Hispanic human beings. Shortly before his rampage, he published a piece of writing expressing a hate-filled white supremacy ideology as the motivation for his actions. He killed twenty and maimed dozens of others. I went to bed feeling a great sadness.

When I woke up in the morning I checked the news and was horrified to hear of yet another young man committing mass murder, this one in the early morning hours in a downtown district of Dayton, Ohio leading to the death of twelve persons and so many others wounded and traumatized. The young man had associated himself in the past with the extreme left wing group known as ANTIFA, but his motivation for the murders seemed to have no other purpose than to express his long-standing fascination with violence.

So with this double dose of distressing bad news, I went to worship with a heaviness of heart and unprepared to address directly the horrors that had taken place in less than 24 hours. We were blessed that Sunday with the presence of the young Allegro Academy musicians from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Their music helped lift my heart.

But now I have had two weeks to reflect on the division, hatred and violence of our country and to listen for words I believe God might want spoken to address at such a time.

My reflections led me to the place Jesus speaks most directly on the subject of "hate." He said that although the rest of the world may tell us that there is a place for hate – specifically in relation to those people we call "enemies" with their apparent desire to do us harm – if we want to be his followers, hate is not okay for us. "No," he said, "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute us." A hard teaching indeed. Jesus not only taught this, but lived it out as well. When his enemies came to arrest him, he did not take up a sword to harm them. He loved them, dying for all people. Why? Because, he said, all human beings are precious to God. We are called to love like God.

So a couple of young men consumed with hate inflicted untold amount of grief and pain. Aren't we allowed to hate them and the others who promote hateful ideologies?

Jesus said no. All the big time religions teach love, but there is no other religion in which the commandment to love is taken to such extremes. It is not easy being a Christian.

Full disclosure: My political leanings tend to be in the direction of what is thought of as "liberal", though not all of them. One of the unfortunate things about our political climate is that we assume that "liberals" and "conservatives" will fall in line regarding every issue.

Nonetheless, as a "liberal" it seems clear to me that there need to be better gun laws. For instance, I can't see the justification for ordinary citizens owning assault weapons, especially if we are following the tenets of Jesus. And as a "liberal" it is easy for me to lay blame in certain places of power for the recent rise of the hateful ideologies.

But this isn't what I want to talk about in this sermon, so if your political inclinations differ from mine I hope you'll hang in there with me.

What is clear to me is this: There aren't any laws that can be passed that will solve the problem of hatred and division that plagues our country.

I was having a conversation a while back with a friend whose political perspective tends to fall to the right of mine. I was conscientiously avoiding politics, but somehow we stumbled onto a

subject that set my friend off. What struck me was the tone of sadness and discouragement my friend expressed as he lamented all the haters out there, clearly referring to people on the left. My first thought was that he was delusional and was locating the hate on the wrong side, but on second thought I realized hate IS precisely what he sees coming from the left. He may miss some of the hate arising from the right, but he wasn't wrong. There IS hate on the left as well as the right, and all this hate is poisoning our country.

The truth is nobody has a monopoly on hate. We all have the capacity for hate. The Biblical understanding of the paradoxical nature of human beings is on the mark: In Genesis 1 we hear we are all made "in the image of God" which is to say we all have a profound capacity for love and creativity that reflects God's nature. But Genesis 2 and 3 immediately goes on to describe how our nature also includes an ongoing bondage to the power of sin – which is to say we all have strong inclinations towards self-centeredness and self-delusion, which in turn leads to the capacity in each of us to be cruel.

Before Jesus said we are to love our enemies, he said some other things in the Sermon of the Mount that can be very challenging, one of which I would like to focus on. He said that if we have anger in our hearts there is no essential difference between us and a murderer. On the surface, that seems absurd. But his point was that if we have within us the desire to hurt others, then given the right (or perhaps better "the wrong") set of circumstances all of us are capable of murder. If we say "*no not me!*" then we haven't acknowledged the humbling truth expressed in the saying, "*there but for the grace of God go I.*" Perhaps if we've avoided experiencing feelings that rise to the level of hate it is because it has been our good fortune to never have had our rights and privileges threatened in any serious way.

So in this moment in history even as we do well to call out the clear and obvious evil that is the hatred expressed in White Nationalism in our country along with other hate-based ideologies, if we really want to heal this nation we would do well to also look at the capacities for hatred in ourselves.

I listened to a very illuminating Ted Radio Hour Podcast on the theme of "*Why We Hate.*" The four featured speakers gave me much to think about.

One was a former neo-Nazi who described being bullied as a child. As a teenager he found himself in a very isolated and lost place, which made him easy prey for a demagogue peddling an ideology of hate. This ideology seemed to bring clarity and coherence where there had been only confusion and despair. Over time he rose to a position of leadership among the neo-Nazis and participated in committing acts of violence.

Fortunately by the grace of God he underwent a kind of conversion of the heart. This grace was experienced most directly through the ongoing opportunity his job provided him to come in contact with the people his ideology had taught him to hate and to discover their humanity and capacity for goodness. Like the Apostle Paul, he repented of his hate and violence, and devoted himself to reconciliation and peacemaking.

The second speaker was a woman named Sally Kohn who wrote a book entitled, "*The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing Our Humanity.*" She pointed out that psychologists talk about hate and prejudice as existing on a spectrum: On one end are things like Genocide. But at the other end are things most of us can recognize in ourselves: the belief that my group is inherently superior to some others, and the subsequent avoidance of people belonging to those groups.

She quoted a philosopher who pointed out, *“We don’t have mass atrocities because there are a handful of psychopaths. There weren’t enough psychopaths in Germany or Rwanda to explain genocide. We have genocide because masses of otherwise ‘good’ people participated in them.”*

I was also struck by this comment: *“We make too many excuses for the small petty ways we hate that seemingly aren’t that bad but add up to a culture and a climate that is cruel and allows greater inhumanities and injustices to fester, and thereby we manage to not see ourselves as complicit in creating this culture.”*

She suggested we move away from the idea of there being “good people” and “bad people” and instead just see “people” – each with capacities for both good and evil. This is precisely what Jesus was about in challenging the strict categories of sinner and righteous that he encountered in the Pharisees.

The third speaker was a blogger named Dylan Marin who was struck by the intensely hate-filled comments he would get online from people in response to the writings he posted on the internet. The idea came to Dylan to reach out to the people with the most venomous of attacks, and he was pleased to discover that some were actually willing to engage him in a conversation. He began with a simple question: *“Why did you write that?”* His goal wasn’t to persuade the people that their point of view was wrong but rather to make a connection with them by gaining a greater understanding of where they were coming from. He turned these encounters into a fascinating podcast entitled, *“Conversations with People Who Hate Me.”*

Dylan spoke of the importance of empathy. He made some remarkable connections with people, discovering that their experiences in life were not so very different from his own. He realized that he could empathize with the hardships people had endured without accepting the conclusions they’d drawn from those hardships. The mantra he kept repeating to himself was *“Empathy is Not Endorsement.”*

This is a quote from Dylan that stood out for me: *“Before I started this project I thought that the real way to bring about change is to shut down opposing viewpoints with carefully worded essays seeking to defeat those with whom I disagreed, but I soon learned that those essays were only cheered on by those who already agreed with me. Sometimes the most subversive thing you can do is talk with a person who disagrees with you.”*

The last speaker was a journalist named Anand Giridharadas who spent two years investigating the story of two men whose lives intersected shortly after 9/11.

The first was named Mark Strummond who, enraged by the terrorist attacks of that day took a gun to three convenience stores in the Dallas area and shot three clerks he believed to be Muslim (though one wasn’t.) Afterwards Mark boasted, *“I did what every other American wanted to do but didn’t have the nerve.”* Two of his victims died.

The one survivor was named Rabsineed Buddam. “Razz” as he is known is a Muslim, Pakistani emigrant. He distinctly recalled the experience of being shot: It was like a thousand bee stings, evoking from him a cry for his mother. Seeing the blood pour down from him onto the floor he made a promise to God that if God would give him a second chance at life he would devote himself to helping others.

Without health insurance, the medical costs of his recovery left him financially destitute.

Mark Strummond was born into poverty. His mother told him that she was fifty dollars short of aborting him. In elementary school Mark would take knives to school, scaring other children and getting suspended repeatedly. But there was another part of Mark that got expressed when he visited his grandparents’ home where he could spend hours tenderly caring for their horses.

As an adult Mark ended up in prison. In Anand's telling every institution Mark encountered — his family, his school, the work place and prison — in some sense failed him, leaving him worth off.

Anand read Mark's writings in an attempt to get inside his hate outlook. The picture he came away with was of a small, bewildered man for whom the world didn't seem to have a place. To compensate for this Mark manufactured a sense of belonging through the hate ideology he adopted, thinking of himself as a heroic warrior fighting to hold on to the "True America."

Anand said, *"If you want to have a world where there is less hate you have to understand what hate does for the hater."* He said, *"I think hate solves real problems that people have that make it very useful to people. It... can give aimless people purpose, it can take a life of petty frustrations and setbacks and suddenly externalize them through hate into a sense of grandeur and mission. It can provide a band-aid cover for fear and pain and present a certain face to the world that that seems preferable to the self that feels mocked – a self that feels so unsure and uncertain in this world."*

The words Anand uses to describe somebody like Mark Strummond resonate on a lower level I think with all of us to some degree.

Mark Strummond ended up on death row. It was, in Anand's words the first institution that left him better than when he arrived. Mark had positive interactions with clergy and social workers and journalists. For the first time in his life he confronted the hatred that had defined him. He read Victor Frankl and heard about the experience of Jews in the Holocaust. He found God.

And then he heard that the man who he had shot seven years earlier was trying to save him.

In the years since being shot Razz had managed to rebuild his life from a combination of hard work and good fortune. He studied to be an IT and started his own successful business. He paid off his debts. Finally on stable ground financially, Razz felt blessed, and with this sense of blessing came a feeling that he owed the world something. He remembered the promise he had made to God and now in 2008 he was ready to turn towards carrying out this promise.

Looking at this deeply troubled world, Razz came to the idea that the greatest intervention he could make in the cycle of violence and hatred that plagued humanity was to commit a symbolic act, which would be to forgive Mark publicly in the name of Islam and its Doctrine of Mercy.

As Anand puts it, *"A newly minted American citizen, Razz had come to believe that Strommund was a product of a hurting America that couldn't just be lethally injected away. And so this immigrant pleaded with America to be as merciful to a native son as it had been to an adopted one."*

Nonetheless it came to pass that on July 21, 2011 shortly after a sobbing Razz testified in defense of Mark Strommand's life, his execution was carried out. Afterwards Razz reached out to Amber, Mark's eldest daughter, who was herself an ex-con and ex-addict, in order to offer his assistance in helping her to find solid ground.

The title of Anand's book about Razz and Mark is "The True American." It told the story of how contrary to Mark's initial fantasy of what "true America" looked like, it was Razz the Muslim, Pakistani immigrant who embodied the spirit of a true American – somebody who displays both hard work and mercy, calling us all to live by our better angels.

It goes without saying that Razz the Muslim with his symbolic act of forgiveness of the man who sought to kill him did a better job of imitating Jesus than the rest of us manage in the course of our lives.

Anand concluded with these words of warning: *“If we don’t attend to the fates and fortunes of the persons who feel they are losing their world in the transformation that is taking place as we inevitably become increasingly multi-cultural — if we just wait for them to no longer be here — I think the next many decades are going to be a very rough ride.”*

To help heal the divisions and hatred that plagues our country, we each need to look inward to see the ways we participate in the perpetuation of hatred.

“Why do you see the speck in your brother or sister’s eye,” said Jesus, *“but not the log in your own?”*

In the kindness of Jesus,

Pastor Jeff