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Reading: Matthew 16:20-30

“Who do you say you are...”

Sermon delivered on August 20, 2107

Sermon Outline

If Jesus were around to ask the question, he sure would get some interesting answers today.

Who do you say I am seems to be at the heart of this tectonic shift in our politics that has touched our lives in almost every aspect of who we say *we are*. A portion of the answer to that question has got to be the ability to be rigorously honest about ourselves and our predecessors.

As my friend Jim Rigby says,

“It is important to realize that racism developed in white European and American cultures, not as a personal dislike of people of color. But as a way of rationalizing colonization, enslavement and exploitation in places like Africa, India and the Americas. If we try to be personally friendly within the remaining cultural structures of unequal wealth and power, we should not be surprised that we have not removed the roots of the problem...It is economic and political parity, not politeness, that will measure our progress in facing America’s original sin of racism.”

It is why, in the midst of our arguments and disagreements and even agreement about many things; why in our movement forward as a nation over our short history; why — when we see ourselves overtly turn back in the direction of our guilt and the efforts good people continue to make to create a new future — that we react with such outrage, dismay, shock and awe.

Many people believe in the idea that the United States is by definition *benevolent*, if an imperfect experiment in the history of humankind.

And, as I learned working with kids the classroom...fairness is at the core of respect and trust and a willingness to reach beyond the comfortable, willing to go further than we thought we otherwise might.

That fairness and “benevolent” perception we hold of ourselves as Christians - has been sorely tested against this week, again in our history and herstory...as it has before.

The broad population of our nation, as watched by the world, has found itself face to face with the unwinding of fairness that has become overtly vulgar in the misguided notion that those who oppose hate somehow are in the “equivalency range” with those who espouse it — an uninformed and careless flippancy that has whipsawed us into outrage and action.

It is ignorant and dangerous and malevolent at any time to think that fine people, fine march for hatred and the lifting up of our nation’s historical inhumane practices as something to which one should aspire as a remedy for the present.

Do we have to place our hands on the doors of the ovens at Auschwitz to remember that we learned that lesson already?

Do we have to go back to the lynchings of the early 1900's, as an example, to remember that, in fact, the murder of Heather Heyer was fueled by the same hatred, guilt, shame, anger and selfishness that tied the nooses around the necks of those who were lynched; a symbol that is still used today by hate groups, along with the Nazi swastika, torches, hoods, and Confederate flags.

This is not new - but it is now ours to address; and it is now ours to say who we are.

Who are we?

What do we teach?

How informed are we in our faith and our faith-based response?

What do we say to one another?

How do we bring the Jesus that walks with us each day in our hearts and memory to bear on the same hatred that executed him.

I believe that moral behavior is “programmed” in us as much as our ability to learn language. Ethical, moral teachings **are** - there are no equivalent opposites —

there is only abdication of what is of our own selves, the inherent nature of our creation our of God's love. Morality cannot be spliced and diced. We know goodness. We get into trouble when we try to parse it...and then wonder why people are harmed.

It was an August day in 1903, the 10th, to be exact.

In The Chicago Daily Tribune, Teddy Roosevelt sounded “a note of alarm” at the increasing tendency toward the punishment by lynching tied to mob violence, stating that this tendency is driving the Republic to anarchy.” He made no mention that the lynchings were mostly used against African Americans.

By the time FDR became our 32nd president in 1933, 30 years later and during the Great Depression, not much had changed regarding lynching. And FDR had a dilemma - a moral problem.

The South was living in a time of Jim Crow, and these laws were held in place by powerful Southern Democrats that FDR needed to advance his New Deal Agenda. Any attempt to institute a "civil rights agenda" would alienate Southern Democrats and jettison his agenda.

He was equivocating. Anti-lynching - New Deal; New Deal - anti-lynching.

Eleanor was not happy with Franklin's lack of decisiveness. In fact, she was so vocal and strident about the need for anti-lynching legislation that the KKK put a \$25,000 bounty on her head.

"According tot the National Archives "Forward with Roosevelt" on the Blog of the FDR Presidential Library and Museum":

The anti-lynching movement was as controversial then as the #blacklives matter movement is today. Between 1882 and 1968 more that 3,300 African Americans were murdered by lawless white mobs. There were 28 such murders in 1933 alone. The victims were often tortured, beaten, buried alive and hanged. Almost no one was arrested or convicted for these crimes."

The blog recounts the following:

In October of 1933, on Maryland's eastern shore, 23 year old George Armwood, accused of assaulting a 71 year old woman, was lynched by a "frenzied mob of 3,000 men, women and children...who overpowered 50 State Troopers." (NYT) The NAACP called on President Roosevelt to condemn the act.

He said nothing.

Then a short while later, two white men were dragged out of a San Jose jail and lynched on December 7, 1933.

FDR finally responded in a nationally broadcast radio. In part he said,

This new generation, for example, is not content with preachings against that vile form of collective murder — Lynch law — which has broken out in our midst anew. We know that it is murder, and a deliberate and definite disobedience of the Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” We do not excuse those in high place or in low who condone Lynch law.

But Roosevelt would not support an anti-lynching bill.

Who was he?

Who do we say he was?

He, himself, explained it to his biographer:

“If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk.”

We've heard it before...

“It's just not time. We're not ready. It will be too - name the rationalization.”

And, so, again, minorities become the human collateral damage as a nation “gets ready.”

Sorry, no patience for a repeat of that..

White Supremacists.

Celebration of the Confederacy that fought to secure slavery

KKK

Fine People.

Fine people....

Really.....

Love them? Yes.

Stop them? Yes.

Who do we say we are? Let our actions say who we are...

And let's not revive our soul or our nation by standing quietly, for one second, considering opposition to and promotion of hate as two sides of the same coin...

Flag Salute

Written following the lynching of George Armwood on October 18, 1933 in Princess Anne, MD

Republished in The Crisis Magazine 1940 15 cents

(Note: IN these days when armies are marching and there is much talk of loyalty and democracy on all fronts in America, it is being said that the strongest defense of democracy lies in the unity of all groups in the nation and a conviction that each has a stake in a democratic government. When it was announced in Washington on October 9, almost simultaneously that the federal anti-lynching bill had been killed in the Senate and that African Americans would be segregated and discriminated against in the US armed forces, The Crisis received several requests to reprint this poem. It was written after a lynching which occurred in Princess Anne, Maryland, October 18, 1933.)

“I pledge allegiance to the flag” —

*They dragged him naked
Through muddy streets,
A feeble-minded black boy!
And the charge? Supposed assault
Upon an aged woman!*

“Of the United States of America”—

*One mile they dragged him
Like a sack of meal,
A rope around his neck,
A bloody ear
Left dangling by a patriotic hand
Of Nordic youth! (A boy of seventeen!)*

“And to the republic for which it stands”—

*And then they hanged his body to a tree,
Below the wind of the county judge
Whose pleadings for that battered human flesh
Were stifled by the brutish, raucous howls
Of men, and boys and women with their babes,
Brought out to see the bloody spectacle
Of murder in the style of '33!
(Three thousand strong, they were!)*

“One nation, indivisible”— (“under God” had yet to be added)

*To make the tale complete
They built a fire—
What matters that the stuff they burned
Was flesh—and bone—and hair—
And reeking gasoline!*

“With Liberty—and Justice”—

They cut the rope in bits

And passed them out,

For souvenirs, among the men and boys!

The teeth no doubt, on golden chains

Will hang About the favored nets of sweethearts, wives,

And daughters, mother, sister, babies, too!

“For ALL!”

—Esther Popel

From Jesus to George Armwood to Heather Heyer...

Jesus asks, Who do people say that I am?

Where you there when they crucified him?

Then Jesus asks, Who do you say I am?

Where you there when they crucified him

If we were there in the only way we could be, then all this **should** cause us to tremble when anything other than love is embraced...

There is no moral equivalency between the embrace of hatred and violence or words or actions that lead to such things...

and freedom and love, fairness, justice...

Who are we and who do we say Jesus is — is at the very heart of what we do and who we send out in God’s name and ours.

There is no moral dilemma. Just moral action as Christians and those who, indeed, seek a benevolent world that reflects God’s love.