

August 13, 2017
Pentecost 10
Walking on Water
1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33
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This is Racism! This is Bigotry!
And the Spirit of God calls us to name it, here, today.

It's been a hectic week filled with doctor's appointments and cancer tests. Today's sermon was written on Thursday instead of Saturday in anticipation of a painful recovery from dental surgery. Waking up Saturday pain-free was a gift until I heard the news of the pain-filled and hate-filled rally in Charlottesville, VA.

A large group of mostly white males gathered Friday evening on the campus of the University of Virginia. Carrying tiki torches, they chanted "Blood and soil!" into the faces of peaceful counter protestors. In videos posted to social media from Friday night, the white supremacists can be seen goading their opposition with shouts of "Jews will not replace us" and "white lives matter." This is racism. This is bigotry. The impromptu protest took place the night before a march planned by white nationalists, self-proclaimed neo-Nazis, members of the so-called alt-right movement. 2,000 and 6,000 people were expected to attend Saturday's rally — billed as "Unite the Right" — in Charlottesville.

Counter protestors led by clergy members stood in a line singing, "This Little Light of Mine," and proclaiming "Love has already won. We have already won," to drown out the opposing chants

The controversial group, Unite the Right says it exists to unify the far-right wing and "affirm the right of Southerners and white people to organize for their interests," according to its Facebook page. The genesis for this march and protest? The state of Virginia is planning to remove the statue of Confederate Army General Robert E. Lee from a park in Charlottesville. The news this morning is even more horrifying. One woman is dead and dozens are injured from an attack with a car. This is bigotry. This is racism. How do we, followers of Jesus Christ respond to these overt acts of racism? How do we respond to the racist attack against two young women on a MAX train that culminated in the murder of their defenders? How do we respond to this administration's proposal that would grant visas to only educated, wealthy, English-speaking foreigners, favoring white applicants? How do we respond when our friends, neighbors or family complain that immigrants, especially Mexicans are taking our jobs? How do we respond to vicious demands to "speak English!" or "go back where you came from" And...what does all of this have to do with walking on water?

Fear! It all starts with fear.

What makes you terrified? I mean really terrified! Where do you go when you are terrified? Where do you run? Many years ago, I experienced deep, visceral terror. A man with whom I was involved threatened me at gun-point. Somehow, I was able to escape and I ran!

I ran blindly down the stairs, into the night, down the street, through neighborhoods, across busy streets until I thought he was no longer following me. For the next two years I was hyper-vigilant, scanning every crowd, every restaurant I entered, fearful that he would be there. It was so exhausting that I just wanted to hide in a cave like Elijah. We are all too often prone to run for our lives, like Elijah in the face of turmoil. Prone to run away from the needs of others, away from uncomfortable topics, away from the kingdom of heaven.

After that gun-point incident I knew I was not worthy to live in God's community. I knew there was no one who would come to my defense. When I told my story, the response was to blame me for getting into the situation. The response was to dismiss the incident saying "It couldn't have been that bad". "Why didn't you fight back?" So, I wandered in the wilderness, like Elijah thinking I was alone and rejected. In the midst of that aloneness, in that the sheer silence stood God.

And here's what "walking on water" has to do with all of this. After feeding the huge crowd, Jesus sent them the disciples away. He spent the night on a mountain-top praying.

Shortly before dawn, he went to the disciples, in the midst of a raging storm "Walking on the water" and he scared the bejeebers out of them. In their exhaustion and fear they thought Jesus was a ghost, an evil apparition. Not a surprise. In the Ancient Middle East the sea was thought to be the center of darkness, evil and chaos. The disciples had rowed directly into the middle of evil's realm, and the waves of evil were attacking them mercilessly. When they saw the evil sea creature approaching, they knew there was no escape.

There is an evil walking around in this nation. Its name is racism, its name is bigotry, and its name is white supremacy. We need not be afraid to confront this evil, to speak the truth, to stand up to hatred. Because Jesus is in the midst of it. God was there with Elijah in the sheer silence, amidst the raging tumult. Jesus was there with the disciples on the water, in the chaos. Listen to Jesus words above the roar of the storm. Take heart! I am! Do not be afraid!

Peter steps out in fear and faith: "OK, if it really is you, Lord command me to come to you." Show me how to walk on water like you do.

With one word, Jesus invites: "Come" Peter sets out on the water toward Jesus. But the wind continues to rage and torment and Peter freaks out. Forgetting for just a moment that Jesus is right there in front of him, he begins to sink. Jesus reaches out his hand to save Peter, they get into the boat and the storm stops.

Elijah and Peter were servants of God doing the work they had been called to do. We think of them as brave in the face of rejection and persecution and danger. It ought to give us hope that even these pillars of the biblical narrative become discouraged, frightened and they waver in their faith.

When we are tempted to run away from the face of evil or danger, when we are tempted to minimize the reality of racism, when we are afraid to speak truth to power, Jesus speaks into the storm, take heart, don't be afraid, God is in the midst of the turmoil. Be still and hear the sheer silence of the presence of God. Listen to Jesus' voice speaking into the raging wind of life: Take heart, I am, do not be afraid. Accept Jesus invitation to "Come" – especially at the most difficult times.

The Psalmist knew the presence of God the Lord well and wrote, "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak." The Lord will speak peace to the people. The Lord will speak peace to the hearts of the people of South Korea and Russia. The Lord will speak peace to the hearts of the people of Charlottesville, VA.

Listen to what Jesus tells the disciples, "take heart!" Not just "butch up" but seriously, "take heart" Because it is in our HEARTS that we believe. It is with our mouths that we confess.

Deep, visceral fear, the kind of fear that has us running for our lives resides in the same core of our being as does trust and confidence. Trust and confidence that has us walking on water toward Jesus. Jesus invites us to "come", walk on the water the water of our baptism where we are plunged into the same death and resurrection as he. Jesus invites us to "come" to this table where he offers his body and blood in the bread and wine.

Fear and faith reside together in the winds, the earthquakes and the fires. Take heart! Jesus' saving hand resides in the chaos, too.

In support of those who joined an act of public witness against racial injustice yesterday in Charlottesville, Va., the Rev. William O. Gafkjen, bishop of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, issued the following prayer on behalf of the conference.

Let us pray:

Just and merciful God, we give you thanks for our sisters and brothers, bishops, pastors, deacons, people of God who this Saturday walk the way of the cross in Charlottesville, Va. On this day and in that place, they join other courageous and faithful people across time and space to stand against bigotry, hatred and violence; to stand with those who are intended victims; and to stand for justice and mercy, peace and equality for all people.

We stand with them in prayer, asking you to empower them, protect them, and use their witness as hopeful sign of your resurrection reign afoot in your beloved and troubled world. By your might, break the bondage that bigotry, hatred and violence impose on their victims and their perpetrators. May your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

And, we pray, empower us in our own communities to follow their lead as fellow servants to your dream of a community in which all people and their gifts are welcomed and honored, cherished and celebrated as beloved children of a just, merciful and loving God; through Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world.

Amen