

Is Anti-Racism the 'Alt-Left'?

A reflection in the aftermath of the white supremacist rally
in Charlottesville, VA

Matthew 15:1-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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My, oh my, it's been one of those weeks that drive those who strive for social justice crazy. Where to begin? How about with scripture? I've always found that's a good place to start.

Here in Matthew 15 we find the religiously legalistic Pharisees and scribes complaining to Jesus because his disciples break the traditional laws of cleanliness by not washing their hands before they eat. Jesus calls them hypocrites because they themselves do not follow all the commandments of God, like honoring one's father and mother. In a teaching moment, Jesus tells the crowd he gathers around him it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but rather what comes out of the mouth that defiles. When the disciples question Jesus' strong response, Jesus says the Pharisees and scribes are simply blind guides leading the blind. Strong words. When Peter says that they still don't understand, Jesus elaborates:

*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But **what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions...** These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile" (vv. 17-20).*

How can we apply this teaching to what we've witnessed this past week? First, however, lest we simply point a finger at others, let's make sure we take a good close look at ourselves in the mirror. This proves to be a fairly good indicator of our own spiritual health at any given moment. We are asked to monitor the words that come out of our mouths. Why? Because what we say is a reflection of what's in our heart – our true intentions. **It is often our words, proceeding from our hearts, that reveal the condition of our spiritual and mental well-being.**

As this country has experienced throughout this past week, and most certainly will in the months ahead, we **have heard defiling words revealing that some treasure a sense of superiority over others based on skin color, who they worship, and who they love.** And while we have built into our constitution a right to free speech, we also have a right to safety when not tolerating those who are intolerant. These two rights clashed in Charlottesville, VA, just over a week ago.

The aftermath has been filled with words and actions that reveal the nature of the hearts of where folks in this nation stand on issues such as white supremacy, and especially racism. I have read so many articles and seen so many news clips over the past week that it made my head spin. Perhaps that happened to you, as well. My

inclination is to feel responsible to respond as a pastor, including in and through a sermon. The task, however, has become a bit overwhelming in scope. How can the events of the past week, and their implications of where we are as a nation, be summarized and reflected upon from a progressive faith perspective in 15 minutes? Well, it can't, of course. Therefore, I encourage you to pay attention to and learn about what's going on, and then respond in your own way.

What happened last week reveals something that in the scope of things we shouldn't find too shocking. Racism, especially from the perspective of persons of color, has always remained bad. **Many have thought we've entered a post-racial society. That, as it turns out, isn't true.** But what has been lying just beneath the surface for quite some time now is making its way back into the public sphere.

Many have contributed some of the blame to our President. After all, he did indeed run a political campaign focused, in part, on riling up the disenfranchised white working class who've experienced dwindling fortunes and feel their power and influence is being replaced by people of color, people from nationalities other than historically European, people who aren't Christians. These are legitimate concerns that must be addressed, but fanning fears of the 'other' is neither the correct nor the Christian way to go about it.

We don't have time to look at all the necessary details, but let's look at the President's own words. His initial response to the violence in Charlottesville, VA, was to blame both sides in the events that led to the death of one woman, Heather Heyer, and the injury of many others by **vehicular domestic terrorism**. That approach drew much criticism. It seemed to many the President was making a **moral equivalency** between white nationalists and white supremacists, neo-Nazis, the KKK, collectively known as the alt-right and considered hate groups, and those protesting their hateful views of supremacy.

Did these words proceed from the President's heart? Granted, he had a point that there was violence perpetrated by both sides. And **as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus we should staunchly denounce violence on any side and stand behind and promote what is often called the Third Way. This is the way of strict non-violent protest and resistance.** It was the way of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and it must be our way as well, as people of faith.

In his second response on Monday, two days after the Unite the Right Rally and counter-demonstration, and after the overwhelming pressure that he personally condemn white supremacist organizations by name, the President read a statement that included, "Racism is evil." It certainly is, Mr. President. Then he continued, "And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans." This was a good and necessary statement. But his visual discomfort in presenting it led many to question his genuineness and whether those words really proceeded from his heart.

The President, as it turns out, showed what appeared as his true feelings, his intentions, his heart, the next day. At a press conference where he was supposed to only make a brief statement about infrastructure, he couldn't help but jump back into the fray. He doubled down on his original thoughts by concluding that there were "very good people" who were part of the white supremacist, neo-Nazi rally. I encourage you to watch the video produced by VICE that is an up-close look at the actual march itself. It's evident that this wasn't the case. **From a moral standpoint, how can torch-**

carrying folks yelling “You will not replace us” and “Jew will not replace us” be considered “very fine people?”

Then in what appears to be a newly invented phrase, **the President labeled the counter-demonstrated as the ‘alt-left’**, claiming that they were “very, very violent” and charged in without a permit. **White supremacists, and those who sympathize with their message, claimed a win following this press conference and were even more emboldened because of our President’s words.**

After several days of intense reflection, here’s my take. And I say this as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), committed to a ministry of inclusion, social justice, and peace. I truly believe the words at that press conference, those which came out of the mouth of President Donald J. Trump, proceeded from his heart. **I’ll let you decide for yourself if his words have defiled him. But when it comes to the issue of racial equality, I personally and professionally believe his words fall into the category, quoting Jesus, “For out of the heart come evil intentions...”**

Yesterday, a rally in Boston to protest hate speech, hate groups, and racism in this country drew 40,000 people. Thousands gathered in other rallies in cities including Atlanta, Dallas, New Orleans, Houston, Memphis, and others. **The President tweeted that he applauded those “who are speaking out against bigotry and hate. Our country will soon come together as one!” Really? While I will always hold out hope, I do not see how the often-divisive words proceeding from this president’s heart will contribute to that effort. His words of unity ring hollow to many.**

Let’s be real. Racism is long from dead in this country. Thanks to the words from those in power who buy into the philosophy of the alt-right, those hate groups are being emboldened. While overt white supremacy remains socially unacceptable for the most part, covert white supremacy – much of which isn’t really even considered being racist by good white folks – still dwells deep within our country’s institutions. And yes, if we’re honest, still exists somewhat and somewhere deep within our own hearts. It’s simply part of our conditioning.

So how do we respond, especially if violence is out of the question as our response to white supremacists? For yes, violence is out of the question. Perhaps we can be guided by our own church’s Mission Statement. The second bullet point states that we are dedicated to **“receive and openly share the love of God.”** Perhaps you’ve noticed a picture going around the Internet of a toddler clothed in full KKK regalia standing in front of a black state trooper pointing at his reflection in the riot shield. The photo is actually from 1992 in Georgia. A mantra often attached to this picture states, “No one is born racist.”

It’s true. It is in the countless conscious and especially unconscious ways that we are taught to be racist. So perhaps **changing hearts and minds of white supremacists involves openly sharing the love of God with them in such a way that they begin to question the hating of ‘others’ that dwells in their hearts, and then spews forth in their words and actions.**

The third bullet point in our Mission Statement is that we are dedicated to **“reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.”** We are indeed called to seek peace and to speak out for justice, which of course includes racial justice, among others. So, speak out, remembering that your words proceed from your heart. May they not be words that defile. That’s why the word ‘compassionate’ is included in our mission statement. As many of us have learned, being compassionate isn’t as easy as it seems. For it involves suffering with not only the ones we love, but also with those we might

consider our so-called enemies. **It is only through love and compassion on our part that there is hope that light might make cracks into the darkness of intolerance.**

So, I will end by admitting that I'm still struggling with both my anger and hope toward the wide-ranging events of this week, events that are continuing to unfold. Therein lies the tension. Therein lies the call to the "third way" of non-violent protest and resistance. Therein lies the road to not tolerating the intolerant.

Let us be known as an anti-racist congregation. And if wanting to be on the side of equality, justice, compassion, decency, and love, as well as being on the side that stands opposite those who believe their bloodline, or their place of birth, or their social status makes them superior to anyone labels us as the "alt-left" so be it.

But speak out I will. I hope you will too. For therein, the nature of our hearts is revealed.

Amen.

Resource:

John Pavlovitz, *I Am the Alt-Left, Mr. President*, Aug. 15, 2017

And tons of other articles, blogs, and video over the past week.