

Ephesians 6:10-13

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Trinity Presbyterian Church August 13, 2017

“An Open Letter in Response to Charlottesville, VA”

Dearly Beloved,

Yesterday, was a horrible day. We watched as an entourage of white supremacists, both young and old, marched through Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, VA. They were wielding torches and chanting about “Blood and soil,” shouting that “White Lives Matter” and “Jews will not replace us.” After counter-protesters responded with their own protest against the racist rally, fights ensued, and then someone battle rammed the counter-protesters with their Dodge Charger, killing three and injuring 19.

Today, the *Washington Post* came out with an article whose headline read, “After Charlottesville, will white pastors finally take racism seriously?”¹ As a white pastor, I found this to be an important question, not only for pastors, but for all of us.

Will we white people finally take racism seriously?

It is all too easy to say what happened in Charlottesville is sad, or sick, or tragic, all the while not having to invest much emotional currency. I mean, I am not hooding KKK robes, or marked with Swastika tattoos. I am not saluting Confederate flags. I am not like “them.”

On top of that, we could say that we as a church do take racism seriously. After all, we hold meetings about race. We read books about race. We even have a racial justice team focused on race. It is easy to say we are doing what we can, and the truth is, most of us *are* doing what we can. But the other hard and uncomfortable truth we, as white people, must face is that if black people are bound to stereotypical injustices such as poverty, incarceration and profiling because of their skin color, and if brown people are bound to being thought of as terrorists, or dangerous refugees, or illegal immigrants because of their skin color, then I’m afraid that we white people are bound to supremacy and bigotry and the violent hate-speech which makes us cringe because of our skin color.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/12/after-charlottesville-will-white-pastors-finally-take-racism-seriously/?utm_term=.7ddf7d538d28

I know, I know. We aren't like "them." We don't chant racist slogans, or believe we are better than anyone else. But before our defensive responses kick in too quickly, we have to admit that it is easier to be silent about these things—it is easier to believe that these wrinkles will iron themselves out eventually—than it is to engage with our privileged racial immunity, to feel the pain of it and then ultimately, to stand side by side with those whose lives are directly impacted by the injustice.

Of course, our silence isn't anything new. The banter of white supremacy or the silence of white allies is not a surprise to People of Color, but it is equally degrading. Martin Luther King Jr. once critiqued such silence while sitting in Birmingham prison when he wrote: "I felt that white ministers from the South... would be some of my strongest allies. Instead, some few have been outright opponents... all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the... security of stain glass windows." We hear him wrestling with the same question as the Washington Post: when will we white people finally take racism seriously?

So, beloved, what can we do?

First, I think we have to admit that these horrid acts of supremacy are white people's problem to combat. After all, People of Color did not create the system of white supremacy; white people did. Perhaps it will be the church's response to be the front lines for a change—not as saviors, but as justice seekers who gear up in the armor of God against the present darkness. Especially since our congress basically says nothing and our president blames "many sides" for the violence. Their spinning the facts or remaining quiet equate to a vexing epidemic of "white supremacy blindness" which refuses to see—or rather, refuses to take responsibility for—the emboldening of these hate groups. Charlottesville is what happens when we give white supremacy the room to breathe. Their hate soon enflames out of control and does not care who it takes down with it. This is white America's problem. Racism is "America's Original Sin" as Jim Wallis calls it. And, frankly, it is our problem to face, to listen to solutions from our allies of color and ultimately, to combat wearing the whole armor of God.

Second, I think we need to have these awkward, uncomfortable conversations with our family, friends, neighbors and each other. Perhaps we especially need to speak with our white children about the importance of justice, equality, and working together to dismantle the systems of white power that re-emerge in our society and may even rise unconsciously in our homes. We cannot save their innocent eyes from the news of white supremacists rallying. Nor can we protect them from the realities that evil creates. Chances are, if they are over five years old, their friends of color have already experienced racism in some way, shape or form. And statistics claim that it is common for white children to remain in a bubble of ignorance about race until high school or even college. We have to talk to each other about it. And, as the church, we must teach our children, in word and example, how to stand against supremacy in a society which benefits those who share their privileged pigment.

Most of all, though, I think we need to speak out when we see white supremacy on display. I remember having a conversation with someone from our church about her experience at the YMCA the day after the election. A white man wore swimming trunks with the design of the Confederate Flag on his shorts. She gently asked the man if he realized how his trunks might be

interpreted. He touted the typical party-line rhetoric by saying he's not a racist and that it is a free country and his first amendment right to wear whatever he wanted. She simply said, "Well, I'm sure you are a good person, but I just worry about how the little African-American children who are swimming here feel about your swimwear; now what kind of message do you think you are sending to them?"

Beloved, I know it is difficult. I know it often feels powerless and overwhelming. But I also know that we are called to stand firm in love, peace, justice, compassion, courage and creative faith, all the while bearing witness to a way that is NOT easy, was never easy and will never be easy. Why? Because it is the way of the cross.

Patriarchal white supremacy is what we see parading around in Charlottesville. As a friend noted, it is also what we see wrecking our homes, beating our women and queer people, destroying what is good in religion, controlling economies, excluding trans folk from the military, threatening nuclear war, deciding what is legal, and running most of the entertainment, technology, healthcare, and banking industries in our country.² White supremacy is clearly the Goliath, and we are the small Davids.

But remember: our power does not come from a system or a leader or an ideology. Our power comes from the Holy Spirit who binds us together to stand firm in being a faithful presence in the world. So, whether we need to place a Black Lives Matter sign on our front lawn, or need to hold one-on-one conversations to wrestle through our own conscious, we cannot afford to be silent anymore. Beloved, will we white people finally take racism seriously? Will we finally be willing to bear the cost?

As a response to the racist army marching in Emancipation Park, a group of clergy women and men linked arm-in-arm to silently protest the streets of Charlottesville. They formed a line where they faced the rally's militia group dressed in camouflage gear and carrying assault rifles. They stood, linked arm and arm, as a diverse human shield of faith for what is good and decent and true about our humanity. They are a powerful witness to peace and love and justice in the world. And, beloved, please hear me well: so are we. So. Are. We. Amen.



Figure 1: Picture from San Diego Free Press

² I am indebted to Daniel Tidwell for his Facebook post where he shares these bold insights and language.