

Sermon

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Season of Creation: Land Sunday

August 13, 2017

Readings: Psalm 104 and excerpt from essay "A Gospel of the Ground" by Daniel J. Stulac

Creation's Kinship

This sermon is one that is just born; one that is in first draft. We need a different word this morning than what I'd initially planned because of the events taking place in Charlottesville. I hadn't selected the scriptures suggested for today because I planned to go in another direction. But I want to call one of them to mind. The story is that of the second-generation humans, Adam and Eve's sons. Cain, angered that his brother's offering was blessed by their father and not his, killed Abel. When Adam asked later Cain where Abel was, the resentful brother said, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

So let's pray: May the words spoken and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

In this Season of Creation, today is Land Sunday. Today is a celebration of the very earth herself, and the gifts of abundance she shares. Today is a celebration of the rich biodiversity, that is not only beautiful, but necessary for a healthy ecosystem. Today is a celebration that all of this wonder and bounty comes from our Creator, who looked upon all that was and is being made and calls it "Good, very good."

Humanity itself, is made from the same substance as the soil. We are not separate from creation. Earth is our kin; and we are Earth's. We are part of the gifts and abundance that God has made and called "very good." A celebration of the land, of the earth, must include a celebration of the rich diversity within humanity, as well. The vastness of human characteristics and culture is necessary for healthy humanity, and is to be celebrated as part of God's bounty.

Today is also a time to acknowledge the ways in which we are complicit in harming the very creation that God names good. We use and abuse God's earth, assuming that creation is a resource for our exploitation and gain. We are only capable of destroying God's good creation in this way because of the sin of "selective amnesia," forgetting that we are kin to the mountains and valleys, fields and forests, two-leggeds and four-leggeds. It is that same sin, the selective amnesia about our creatureliness, that fosters some humans to view other humans as mere resource for gain or exploitation, or as less than human, thus elevating themselves for privilege and power they would deny to their kin.

This selective amnesia of kinship drives what we're seeing in Charlottesville this weekend. But atrocities of this kind are not new. As the vice mayor commented in a news report this morning, violent racism was present 50 year ago when the public schools decided to close rather than to integrate and when an African American neighborhood called Vinegar Hill was destroyed. It is not new, he said; it has never left.

Domestic terrorism in the name of white supremacy is what we're seeing in Charlottesville. Only

it doesn't wear a sheet anymore. And, rest assured, it is not confined to Charlottesville or "the South." But let's talk first about how white supremacy *did* show up in Charlottesville, emblematic of our sin of forgetting kinship.

White supremacy showed up, unmasked, this weekend in the throng of thousands of threatening, young white men in polo shirts and khakis, who carried torches and baseball bats as they marched through UVA Friday night and then surrounded St. Paul Memorial Church at the end of the prayer service organized in response to the so-called "Unite the Right" rally planned for Saturday. Those inside the church were not safe to go to their cars. They needed to be escorted by the police or to escort one another. White supremacy showed up unmasked at the so-called "rally" on Saturday, in the cans filled with concrete that white nationalists threw at non-violent protestors, including clergy. Some of our own UCC clergy were in the line of fire, including our national UCC Executive for Justice and Witness Ministries, Rev. Traci Blackmon. White supremacy showed up unmasked as white nationalists antagonized and beat up anti-hate protestors. It showed up when a driver intentionally plowed his car into a group of non-violent protestors and then fled the scene, killing one and injuring 18 others.

White supremacy—unmasked—needs to be named for what it is.

But White supremacy also showed up IN its hood of protection, so that it would be harder to identify. It showed up in the way words were being used, and not. The white nationalist event was portrayed as a "rally." Yet, the word "riot" is almost universally used for groups of black and brown people who protest police violence or other ways in which white supremacy threatens their livelihoods and their bodies. The words "skirmishes" and "clashes" were used instead of "assaults" to describe the way groups of white nationalists set upon non-violent protestors with intent to harm. It showed up in our president's weak response yesterday, condemning hate and violence but assigning it to "many sides," and not clearly to the white nationalist perpetrators.

White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection when militiamen in fatigues openly carried semiautomatic rifles in the melee. Contrast this with how Philando Castille was gunned down in his vehicle by a police officer. Mr. Castille had been stopped because, in the officer's words (my paraphrase), "I could see as he drove by that he had a large nose, which matched a description of an African American man suspected of a crime."

One of the first things Mr. Castille did when the officer came to his door was to tell him calmly that he had a gun in the car, for which he had a legal permit. "Are there any weapons in the car?" is a standard question. Mr. Castille chose to make the officer aware ahead of time. Then, when the officer asked for his ID, Mr. Castille reached into his back pocket, telling the officer, again calmly, that his ID was in his pocket and he was going to reach for it. In that moment, the officer shot him several times. Philando Castille bled to death in front of a small child who was in the back seat of the car when the officer shot into it and in front of the girl's mother, his girlfriend, who was sitting in the front seat and live-streamed what was happening.

Let me say it again. White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection when militiamen in fatigues openly carried semiautomatic rifles. Contrast that with 14-year-old Tamir Rice, who was lazily playing with a gun in a neighborhood park. The 911 caller had said it might be just a toy

gun, but called in case it was real. A police cruiser sped into the park, and two seconds after arriving—one Mississippi, two Mississippi—the officer jumped out of the car and shot Tamir. The boy lay bleeding on the ground. His mother was arrested when she tried to get to him. Tamir was still alive at the time, but the officers failed to administer medical treatment. Tamir died of his gunshot wound.

White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection when Charlottesville police initially stood by while non-violent protestors were under assault by the white nationalist rioters. Consider that the police were not armed in full riot gear, carrying assault-style rifles, and forming battle lines with military-style vehicles. Contrast that to the police response in Ferguson, MO, where African Americans and their allies were peacefully protesting the gunning down of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was shot by police and left for hours in the street, his body uncovered. The violent incidents of a few who were not connected to the non-violent resistance were the police department's excuse to militarize themselves, call in the National Guard, and to threaten, tear-gas, and detain the majority who were taking non-violent action.

White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection in Charlottesville when the words “domestic terrorism” failed to be used by the media, law enforcement, or our president. Surely the parade of torch-bearing white men shouting “You will not replace us!” “We’re taking back our country!” and the Nazi slogan “Soil and blood!” was intended to terrorize people of color specifically, but also LGBT folk and other marginalized groups. Surely driving a vehicle at high speed into a crowd of anti-racist protestors and then fleeing, was meant as an act of terror. We are quick to name such actions “terrorist” when they are perpetrated by people of color or by one whose faith is, say, Muslim.

White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection when that driver who slammed his vehicle into the crowd was neither immediately identified by name nor had his photograph distributed by police. His country of origin, his race, and his religious affiliation was not provided hastily. Yet, when people of color or non-Christians commit acts of terror, these details are immediately broadcasted, and are implicated as motive.

White supremacy showed up in its hood of protection in the police treatment of the motorist suspected of committing this act of terrorism, who was arrested without incident or harm. It brings back memories of Dylan Roof, the white man who was apprehended without incident after killing nine African Americans in Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, SC. He was even taken to a fast food restaurant for a burger by the arresting officers because he was hungry. Contrast that to what happened to Micah Xavier Johnson, a Black suspect in the killing of five police officers in Dallas, TX, last year. The police did not “bring him in” unharmed. Instead, they sent an unmanned robot carrying a bomb into his hideout, and blew him up.

If we don’t understand how white supremacy showed up in its hood of protection in Charlottesville, how do we expect to see how cloaked white supremacy shows up in Madison and in our own beloved Madison Christian Community? Everywhere and anywhere that white bodies are considered more valuable than bodies of color, white supremacy is present. Everywhere and anywhere that so-called “good schools” and “good neighborhoods” are predominantly filled with white people, white supremacy is present. Everywhere and anywhere

that European standards and values, patterns of speech—and even ways of worship—are privileged and viewed as simply “normal,” white supremacy is present.

Yet, as people of faith, as resurrection people, we believe that God, not white nationalism, will have the last word. Love, not hate, will have the last word. Reconciliation and restoration, not white supremacy, will have the last word.

We can see resurrection signs in the number of faith leaders and others who are putting their bodies on the line and raising their voices for the sake of their threatened kin in Charlottesville. We can see hope in our own church sanctuary when we view our “Black Lives Matter” lettering, our gay flag, and our “Be the Church” banner not as sanctuary decorations, but statements of faith. We see it in our pledge to be a sanctuary church for our undocumented kin who are in harm’s way.

We can see resurrection signs of love over hate in all kinds of places. Recently there have been protests on the southern border of Texas against the planned wall to cut off Mexico. Not only do the protesters speak about the unfair treatment of our immigrant kin, but also our butterfly kin, whose habitat will be torn up, and the animals whose currently protected sanctuary will be destroyed.

These efforts to protect people and planet are related, because WE are all related. As we treat the earth, we will treat one another. As we treat one another, we will treat the earth. On this Land Sunday, let us commit to consider all of God’s beloved creation as our kin, the flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. For we were once clay, and it was God who breathed life into us.

I end with a post made yesterday evening by Rev. Blackmon--

Confessions of a woman who preaches:

Casualties caused by BLM activist at protest in 3 years: 0

Casualties caused by White Supremacist in one day: 3 deaths, so far. 25 injuries requiring intervention and/or hospitalization.

Trump’s response to BLM: "They are terrorist!"

Trump’s response to the White Supremacist who elected him: "I blame many sides."

The thing that struck me most about these two days was the fact that the hooded sheets were gone.

The sheets have been replaced with polos and oxfords. Horses traded for Escalades and Sedans. Gasolines torches replaced by tiki torches. Rifles replaced by assault weapons. Ropes replaced by baseball bats. Burning crosses in yards dismissed for crosses in sanctuaries. And wooded areas abandoned for Capitol Hill.

We will still rise.

Hate has no weapon that Love will not conquer.

Amen.