

“Get Out of the Boat”
Matthew 14:22-33

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I wrote a sermon for today. It was an okay sermon – weaving in stories from Edgewood Camp this past week with the Gospel lesson from Matthew. Yesterday morning I went to Grand Traverse Pie Company for a breakfast sandwich and to finish my sermon. I edited a few paragraphs, then I took a break to check the news. I didn’t see much in the Times or the Post, but there was an unfolding story from my colleagues out of Charlottesville, Virginia. As I read and watched videos, I sermon became less and less relevant. Soon it was crumpled on the floor and I started writing a second time.

Charlottesville is the home of the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, and a legacy of celebrating their confederate history through public monuments and landmarks. This year Charlottesville's city officials decided to change that. In the words of their Mayor, they wanted to “change the narrative of race as told through their public spaces.” Their city council voted in April on two such changes: they changed the name from Robert E. Lee Park to Emancipation Park and they voted to remove the large statue of Robert E Lee from the middle of the park.

A month after this vote, there was a torch lit march through the park led by a well-known white supremacist. In July there was a second march. Both of these were considered small – although if 50 white men marched through downtown East Lansing with torches chanting racist slogans I don't know if I would consider that small – but they incited momentum for a larger march to take place this weekend.

A large group of clergy from across the country answered a call to be present in Charlottesville for this march to stand up for love in the face of hate. On Friday night it was

standing room only in a local church as these clergy gathered for nonviolence resistance training, gathered to be inspired by the words of Dr. Cornell West and Rev. Traci Blackmon, and gathered to sing songs of faith and hope to prepare their spirits for the next day. When they went to leave the church that night, they were prevented from doing so. White supremacists had surrounded the church, some with torches, and cops ordered the clergy to stay put in the sanctuary until they were dispersed and it was safe to leave.

On Saturday the events in Charlottesville continued to escalate. There were a few thousand white supremacists gathered and almost as many counter-protestors. It began with yelling. The racist crowds chanted, “blood and soil” - an old popular Nazi slogan - and “You will not replace us.” The yelling turned into shoving and fist fights. In a nearby parking garage, a young black man was beaten by pole wielding young white men. A driver in a car plowed into a group of counter-protestors, killing a young woman. Throughout the city, clergy joined with Black Lives Matter leaders and local students who despite the violence, continued to stand up to evil.

I am sharing what happened in Charlottesville in detail because the details are important. It is important for us to understand the bold actions of the white supremacists because this is not something out of a history book. This is not happening in a country far away. This is our country that gave permission for this to happen. This is our culture that encourages white people to cling to our racist past. It was Charlottesville, Virginia this weekend, but where will the KKK gather next weekend? Who in our state and community watched the same news we did, but found themselves cheering for hate to win? Will they feel emboldened by the young white men who descended on Charlottesville? I keep asking myself: what will happen next?

Rev. Traci Blackmon, the Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries in our denomination, the United Church of Christ, wrote a reflection last night on the day's events. Her

words have stayed with me. She wrote, “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. Gasoline 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.”

This is not the new face of America. This is the same old America that has been lurking in the shadows and waiting for permission to return to the light of day. Racism is not a problem that will be magically solved with the passing of time or when our children grow older. Racism is a cancer that has spread from one generation into the next, metastasizing in form while growing stronger as we ignore it. When I looked at the pictures of the young men with their torches, they looked familiar to me. They looked like classmates I've had and friends I've made. They look like my neighbors and my cousins. I saw a picture of one guy and said, “I think I have that same shirt!” This is not foreign or far away. This is right here in our communities. We want to distance ourselves from these actions, but those young white men who have committed their lives to racism are our young men. They are a part of us.

So, what does the Gospel of Matthew have to share with us as we work towards anti-racism in ourselves, our community, and our country? It has quite a lot to say..

Peter and the rest of the disciples are in a boat, sailing to the next town, while Jesus wraps up business and agrees to meet them later. Jesus does this by taking the most direct route to the boat: he walks on water out on the lake until he reaches the disciples. They are understandably frightened at first – seeing someone walk on water was as unusual then as it would be today. Peter says to Jesus, “If that's really you out there and not some ghost or water-walking ghoul, help me to walk out on the water to you.” Jesus says, “Sure thing, come on out here.” And he does. Peter gets out of the boat and walks on water. It is not until he gets distracted and

frightened by something that he begins to sink and Jesus has to pull him up and out of the water.

The important part of this story is that Peter does it! He does the thing that seems impossible to do. We always talk about Jesus walking on water, and we relegate it as a feat too big for a mere mortal to accomplish. But we forget that Peter walks on water, too. We must remember this. Peter follows Jesus out of the boat and walks on water.

The Peters among us today are all those who showed up to counter-protest this weekend. The students who are 18 and 19 years old who said, “There will not be hate on our campus today. This does not define us.” They got out of the boat and put their bodies on the line to show the rest of us that there is great hope to be found in this millennial generation.

The Peters among us are the people of color who showed up to counter-protest; the people who every day put their bodies on the line just by being black and brown in America. They got out of the boat and put their bodies on the line once more to say, “There will not be hate in our community today. This does not define us.” They reminded us that people of color are at the front lines battling racism every day and that even though they've gotten quite good at walking on water, they need the rest of us to walk beside them.

And finally, the Peters among us are those clergy and people of faith who got out of the boat and put their bodies on the line to say, “There will not be hate in the name of our God today. This will not define our faith.” Christian ministers did this because they know that for too long we have allowed the seeds of racism to germinate in our pews. Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams did this to stand in solidarity, to be the interfaith reminder that these Christian terrorists do not define all of Christianity.

This weekend, in Charlottesville, VA, love got out of the boat and went into the streets. These folks did the impossible by meeting hate with love, violence with peace, and bitterness with hope. I imagine there were moments when they were afraid. When the winds picked up or

the chanting grew louder or the fists started flying....But the Peters of today were smarter than the first guy. They didn't go out onto the water alone. They went together, with arms linked, voices harmonized, hearts strong. I believe that God was out in those streets, lifting them up when they were afraid or started to sink, but I also believe the strength of their miracle came from their courage to be out there together. Together they did not let fear overtake them – love prevailed. Even with all the statistics of violence I shudder to think of what would have happened had they not had the courage to show up and be a force of peace.

While Peter was out walking on the water with Jesus, the rest of the disciples were back on the boat watching him. They did not offer to leave the boat. They did not jump up to join Peter. They watched. The scripture says it was early morning so maybe they were waiting for the coffee to brew or they were still bleary eyed. Maybe they didn't believe Peter could really do it or they were still worried Jesus was a ghost. That, my friends, was the rest of us this weekend.

Many of us had no idea this was coming. Some of us can barely believe an event like this would happen in our streets. All of us, in some form or another, stayed on the boat and watched Peter walk out on the water. I count myself in this. Last month I saw the call for clergy to go to Charlottesville. I read the details of the request for clergy to be present. I looked up how long the drive was. I checked my calendar. And I made a decision. I decided that this call to action was for someone else – someone closer, someone who wasn't just getting back from camp, someone other than me. I stayed on the boat.

I don't want anyone after worship to come up to me and say, “Oh you do other anti-racism work” or “we can't be at everything!” because that is not why I am sharing this. I made a very intentional decision to sit this one out – one that privileged my desire to have a restful August and to stay close to home over the need for allies to show up and support our colleagues in Virginia. If this weekend becomes a turning point in our history or a catalyst for future events, when my

nephew or godson asks me where I was when that happened, I will have to say, “I saw it coming, and I stayed home.”

There are times – for many different reasons – when we cannot or do not get out of the boat, when we sit on the sidelines and watch. We always have very good reasons and excuses why this happens but the end result is the same. It is as important to name the moments in which we made the wrong decision or in which we failed to show up for love as it is to name or remember the times when we got it right. How can we face the truth of racism in our country if we cannot even face the same truth within ourselves?

Fortunately for those of us who want to eradicate racism, fortunately for the disciples who watched Peter, fortunately for me who watched from home this weekend – the Gospel story is not over with the disciples sitting forlorn and confused on the boat. In the verses that follow today's story in Matthew, the disciples get a second chance. The boat comes to shore and the disciples get out of the boat. They follow Jesus out into a new town where they tell stories and watch as he heals those who ask to be healed. The next mention of the disciples comes just a few verses later when the town officials – the Pharisees and scribes – come to find Jesus and demand to know why his disciples are breaking the rules that everyone knows they are supposed to follow. It seems that when the disciples finally left the boat, they were a little braver. They were able to follow their faith even when it meant breaking rules and causing waves. The moment to walk on water has passed, but there are other moments to do great things in the name of peace and justice, and next time they will be sure to seize that moment.

It's the end of the weekend. The news is dying down. The protest crowds have dispersed but we are all the more aware of how racism and hatred is raging through our country. It's time to get out of the boat, my friends. We can do it together, we can try to do it alone, or we can reach out a hand for Jesus to hold us up. No matter how we go about it, it's time to get out of the boat.