

The disciples are in trouble once again on the Sea of Galilee. Hours after Jesus leaves them to hike the mountain, to be alone and to pray, the wind begins pushing them away from the shore. The original text describes them being many stadia from the shore—perhaps, a third to a half a mile—which means there is nothing to which they can strap a rope. They can’t throw out an anchor. They’re adrift in the turbulence, waves battering the boat, when Jesus begins walking toward them in the early dawn.

Now, Matthew, along with the earliest preachers of the church, and preachers throughout our great history, consistently likened the disciples on the boat to the storm and the church itself. The church, afloat in the world and threatened on every side by pounding waves, afraid, anxious, doubting, suffering the pains of all the sea sickness. And I must confess that I am feeling seasick today, and there seems to be no spiritual Dramamine in stock.

I’m seasick today from my view from this boat, looking down over the frothy whitecap sea and feeling the unrelenting wind, wave after wave. I can only guess when the waters will be calm. I’m seasick today, as I hope you are, over the waves of violence, and violent speech, rolling across and throughout our country. And I am seasick worrying that the storm clouds that gather are gaining strength.

As you know, yesterday in Charlottesville, there was a racist rally, planned by white supremacists, to protest the city’s plans to remove a statue of General Robert E. Lee. A man whom many Southerners have been taught to regard as a gentleman, but who—the historical records show—rather enjoyed pouring brine on his slaves, after just having them beaten.

And these white racists carried torches through UVA’s campus on Friday night, purposefully invoking images of a Klan rally. (I heard one journalist say, these were tiki torches, though, which were invented by brown people, the Polynesians!) and they gathered in the city park yesterday morning, where they were met by counter-protestors. And later in the day a disturbed young man, as you know, rammed his car into the counter-protestors, and killed a 32-year-old woman, sent others flying through the air, injured 19, and others were injured throughout the day. I’m seasick of this.

New waves of white racism are whipping up, and they are being aided and abetted and encouraged by the President, and members of his administration, egged on by corporate media, and often ignored by preachers, like me, whose silence in the end amounts to a form of encouragement. [disruption] Bless them.

The storm clouds are gathering as white racists are feeling emboldened in ways that they have not in a long time. When I was a kid, I remember seeing pictures of Klan rallies in history books and museums, and thinking these were images of our country’s dark past—which they certainly were—but they would certainly remain just that...past. We had progressed beyond these barbaric and inhuman acts I thought, and were moving towards a brighter future. The storm was long, centuries long, but it was over, wasn’t it?

Just a couple of generations ago in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, this church was grappling with the issue of racism, and commenced the hard, and often excruciating work of dismantling our Nation's long history of shadow slavery, and the deep turbulent currents of racism that course around and underneath us. And now, I believe, that our church again has the opportunity of demonstrating the love of Jesus in our country and in our city, even when it might be unpopular, and even when it might be dangerous.

Last week when you generously celebrated my one-year anniversary, as I commented at the end, that you were the church that gave me hope, and this is precisely why, because I see in the spirit of this place, the courage, the boldness, and a tradition of meeting the challenges, and meeting the waves with the bow of the ship, so that we don't get broadsided, and flipped, and our influence sinks.

Now, I don't know the future. I don't know what's going to happen, but I know we're in the middle of a storm. What happened in Charlottesville could happen here any time. It could happen here. We have a monument downtown that's been the subject of racial conversation, as part of our city's memory of racial division. There are deep connections just to that spot of ground, historically, as I've come to learn. And I know many preachers in churches like ours, with the leaning toward justice that this church has, that will be preaching just like I am today, and addressing these issues.

But it seems to me that we're always preaching about these things after they happen. Always preaching the day after or the Sunday after the hard week. But I want you to hear this sermon today as a sermon of preparation. Yes, a sermon of reflection, as born out of the events of the weekend, but mainly, mainly, I want you to see it as a sermon of preparation. Because I just happened to have spent much time studying what churches can do in the midst of, and in the wake of, events like Charlottesville.

I spent years studying the Greensboro massacre. November third, 1979, a group of peaceful demonstrators that called themselves, unfortunately, the Communist Workers Party, but mainly they were led by community organizers and students from Duke University Medical School, and they had concern for the laborers of mills in Greensboro, who were working under terrible conditions in the textile mills, and they were trying to fight for their rights, for their health, and they held a rally in the projects. A housing complex called Morningside Homes. And their aim was to gather there and march to downtown Greensboro.

Well they had also, unfortunately, been provoking the Klan, over the course of the summer, and their young idealism—they didn't see what they had dredged up, and they didn't recognize the danger of what they had invited on themselves. But a caravan of Klansmen, lined up in cars, drove up on the rally. And when some of the protestors began to yell things at them, and they began yelling back, people got out of their cars and they started fighting, a fight that looked a lot like yesterday. And then someone signaled in the van at the back of the caravan, and they got out an arsenal, the Klansmen, retrieved an arsenal that they had prepared in advance.

They began to fire on the demonstrators, and they killed five of them in broad daylight. And all this carnage was caught on news cameras by crews who were there, just to film the rally, and

you can go on YouTube and you can type in “Greensboro Massacre,” and you can watch it. And the men who committed those crimes were acquitted by all white juries, twice, on the justification of self-defense.

Now, what did the Christians in Greensboro do? Well, some of them wanted to sweep it under the rug, because they’re proud of Greensboro history, their Civil Rights history, the Woolworth’s counter and the sit-ins and all. They wanted to call them outside agitators, just like the folks yesterday. And some of them were from outside. We’re told the man who drove the car into the crowd was from Ohio.

They wanted to sweep it under the rug, and the Mayor said, “These folks weren’t from here. And these Communists, and these Clansmen, they deserve each other.” But other Christians, other Christians who stand in the tradition of this church, began to prepare the ground for the truth to be told. “What really happened in Greensboro?” they wanted to know. What were the conditions that gave rise to the poverty, that gave rise to the protests, and what were the conditions of the white people’s lives that led them to go into the Klan in the first place? And there was an attempt to understand what all the forces were that collided in that moment, and that had created that horror.

After two decades, they created what was called the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and they involved city leaders across race and class and neighborhood, and they came together and they began to prepare the ground for the truth. And it happened because the Christians pushed for it. And the Christian pastors, and namely the African-American pastors in Greensboro, worked hard for it, and they made it happen. And they created hospitality for all people on all sides of that terrible day to come together and to tell their story, and to offer their apologies, and to receive forgiveness, and to pursue reconciliation.

We have to be a church, a boat on the sea, that is indeed struck on all sides by the waves, but a place nevertheless, where we can tell one another the truth, and receive the truth told about us. That is the first thing.

The great pastor, Peter Storey, said that there’s another condition that was created in Greensboro, and that I commend to all of us, that enables reconciliation to begin in the wake of racist violence. He said there must be a “prime mover.”

Now, in the story that we’ve been given today, you remember that the disciple Peter steps off of the boat. He steps out of the boat’s safety, and into the storm, and begins to walk on the water, just as Jesus stood waiting for him. All of the disciples thought it was a ghost at first. They were so afraid, and they couldn’t imagine that a human being could walk on the water. And I understand that, if I saw that happening, I, too, would think, “There’s a ghost!” But Jesus said. “Calm down everyone!” In fact, he said literally, “Courage! Courage! Be bold! It’s me, do not be afraid!”

There must be people willing to be prime movers. People willing to step off the boat at times, to be bold, and to have courage, and to move toward Jesus in the storm. And I believe that

there are people in this congregation that have the moral fortitude and that courage, and they have demonstrated that before.

In Greensboro, the man's name was Nelson Johnson, an African-American man, regarded by many whites in Greensboro at that time, as "the most dangerous man in Greensboro," because he was a kind of agitator—and some say still is. But listen to what Nelson Johnson did:

When he was alerted that there was going to be yet another Klan rally, in Greensboro, this time. He went to one of the Klan member's homes. And he's walking down the dirt road to the guy's house, and he's seeing all the signs—"Trespassers will be shot"—"Do not enter"—"Beware of the dog." "Beware of the Klansman" is what I wouldn't have wanted to see! But Nelson just kept going, right past the signs, and he went up to the man's house, and he knocked on the front door. No answer. He went around to the back of the house, knocked on the screen porch door. No answer. So, Nelson left him a note, and he went back home. Then he called the man that evening, and he said, "I left you a note on your back door, and the Klansman said, you did what? You've been on my property? You came to my house?" And the man just cursed him out and said...well, you can imagine. Nelson calmed him down and arranged a meeting with him and his cohort, and they met in a hotel. And he talked with them, and they talked to each other about their mutual grievances, face to face. And Nelson talked them out of pursuing the violent rally. He stopped it. He was a prime mover, he was a disciple with courage and boldness, willing to step off the boat for a time, and pursue Jesus in the storm.

You know what else there must also be, in the midst of the storm? There needs to be a boat. And that's where we all come in. There must be a boat for refuge, because Peter starts to sink. The waves of the storm threaten and scar him. He is afraid he might drown. And he begins to sink. But Jesus picks him up and takes him back to the boat.

Now in this boat should be people with no reason to doubt Jesus' power to calm these storms. So, this must be a place where we are, in the world's eyes, unreasonable, but in the light of faith, quite reasonable. We must be a place, for when the time comes, the city sees our doors open. And they see our candles lit, and they see our heads bowed in prayer. And we must be a place of refuge where the storms may batter us, and the waves may threaten us, but we never sink.

Finally, we must be a boat where the passengers have been conditioned, over time, to love their enemies. We come here each Sunday for Sunday School, we read scripture together, we gather for this grand and beautiful worship service. And this is practice, it's conditioning. It gets inside us. The prayers, the language of peace and reconciliation, where we learn that race is a phantom, and a power, and a principality, that has no sway over those who have walked over these waters.

[gesturing toward the baptistery] All that's been washed off, the racism, the materialism, the militarism, it goes down the drain and we're made new. We're made into a community of refuge for the whole city.

Now I want to point out a funny thing, and I'm going to sit down (and fly away). You notice when Peter gets out of the boat and he walks closer to Jesus, and he gets afraid, like I said, and he begins to sink? Jesus questions him, "Why did you doubt, you of little faith?" And he only uses that word 'ye of little faith', which is one word in the original language. "Ye of little faith." He only uses that word in reference to disciples—to us! "Why did you doubt? I've saved you on the boat before. Remember, only a few chapters ago, Peter?" Jesus was asleep in the middle of that storm! "Why did you doubt?"

I know it's hard to see these waves, either in our peripheral vision, or in our direct line of sight. But let us remember this good news. Even when we take the risk of following Jesus, and the waves threaten us, even then, there's no reason to doubt. He will hold us up. He will take us by the hand. He will guide us to refuge. He will never leave us. He will never forsake us.

Thanks be to God!