



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

## Turning Point

*at the eleven o'clock service, August 20, 2017, The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost.*

*Based on Matthew 15:21-28.*

It has been a turbulent, troubling week. I have lost sleep, as some of you may have, because of what I have been seeing and hearing on the news. It seems strange—only ten days ago, my fear and dismay centered on what seemed like the real possibility of a nuclear attack. But that significant concern was quickly overshadowed by last weekend's "Unite the Right" demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Unless you have been vacationing in a remote location cut off from all communication, you know about Charlottesville. White nationalist, alt-right, and white supremacist groups—including but not limited to KKK and neo-Nazi groups, groups mostly from other places in the country—converged on Charlottesville, ostensibly to protest the removal of a Confederate statue. They carried Nazi flags. They carried Confederate flags. They carried tiki torches. They chanted racial slurs and messages of hate. They were met by counter-protesters. The rally turned violent. A neo-Nazi protester deliberately drove a car into the crowd, killing a young woman (Heather Heyer) and injuring 19 others—an act of domestic terrorism horribly echoed later this week by the vehicle attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, Spain.

Seeing those Confederate flags and torches, seeing those Nazi flags, hearing what the white supremacist groups were chanting in Charlottesville made my blood run cold.

Growing up in South Carolina, I came to understand that “separate but equal” meant mostly “separate.” I heard the language of hate. When my high school was de-segregated in the late 60's, the Confederate flag disappeared from that school and from my life. Tragically, it took Dylan Roof's murder of nine African American worshipers at the historically black Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston only two summers ago, to make it possible to remove the Confederate flag from South Carolina's State House.

Last weekend in Charlottesville, the ugliness of racism and bigotry and hate, which have lived mostly underground through our country's history, with occasional flareups, became highly visible ... again.

This past week felt to me, in my bones, like a turning point for our country. It seems to me that our country is being called once again, as we have been multiple times in our history,

to clarify our identity. Who are we as a country? What do we stand for? Protests like the one in Charlottesville are not only about the past; they are about the future of our country.

I am emphatically not a politician, and I am not speaking as one. I am speaking as a citizen of this country and as an Episcopal priest—in particular, a priest serving this congregation of St. Bart’s. It also seems to me that we as Episcopalians and Christians are being called to live more fully into that identity as a way of standing up to, and resisting, hate and bigotry and racism.

Hate and racism and bigotry in any form are wrong. They are antithetical to our identity as Christians and Episcopalians.

Amidst last weekend’s horrific news and images from Charlottesville, I received a gift, which I’d like to share with you. Six years ago, I had the joy of officiating at a marriage here at St. Bart’s. The couple now lives in France, and they have had their first child—a son, who is only a few weeks shy of his first birthday. This family was to be in Manhattan only briefly, and they asked me to baptize their son. (The best work ever!!) This couple, their son, their families and godparents gathered last Sunday. It was pure delight to see this couple and their families again after six years, and I had the honor and joy of baptizing this adorable child.

The Baptism service was informal, with lots of laughter, filled with joyful squeaks and chirps from the baptisand himself throughout the service. Informal, but no less powerful. As you know, any time even one person is baptized, we all renew our own Baptism vows and promises.

And there they were, right in the midst of Charlottesville, these vows and promises. A strong, clear reminder of what we are called to do, how we promise to live our lives:

- *Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?*
- *Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?*
- *Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?*
- *Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*
- *Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?*
- *Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? [1]*

Acts of hate and racism and bigotry are manifestations of these “spiritual forces of wickedness” and “evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of

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God.” We have promised to renounce such evil, and to persevere in resisting it. And so we must.

This Gospel story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a turning point for Jesus. It’s a story chock full of boundaries. Canaanites and Jews had despised—hated—each other for centuries. Jews viewed Canaanites as pagans, unclean. The people of Israel had taken over the land and cities of Canaan, annihilating many, enslaving the rest; so the Canaanites did not feel friendly toward the Jews.

Then there is the gender boundary. In this time and culture, women did not speak to men outside their family. They certainly did not shout to them in public.

Jesus’ response to this woman’s cries for help is ... less than friendly. At first Jesus simply ignores her. Then, at his disciples’ urging, Jesus tells her basically, “I’m not here to help your kind.” Even that rejection does not turn her away. Quite the opposite. She comes even closer and actually kneels before him, pleading on behalf of her daughter. Jesus’ response is extremely harsh. He likens her, a Gentile, to a dog. A particular insult then ... as now.

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

That woman’s persistence and humility and her sharp wit cause Jesus to realize his mission is not only to the people of Israel, but to ALL people. God’s love and blessings are offered to ALL. This woman and Jesus overcome the ethnic, cultural, political, gender, and religious barriers that humans have created ... that humans continue to create. A turning point.

Though heartsick at what we saw and heard in Charlottesville, I was surprised to discover hope. Here’s why. The hatred and racism and bigotry on display in Charlottesville have been living mostly underground in our country for hundreds of years. Evil that is hidden away tends to grow. Evil that is brought into the light has a good chance of being vanquished, or at least weakened ... disinfected.

The evil of our country’s hate, racism and bigotry has been brought to light, which enables us to resist it. We can resist it by naming it for what it is. We can resist it by educating ourselves. The Southern Poverty Law Center has a number of resources, including a map showing 917 hate groups operating in the US. These groups are in every state. [2] We can resist this evil by continuing to keep it in the light, by listening and talking honestly and respectfully about the damage and hurt these evils have caused and continue to cause.

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Another thing that gave me hope were the strong, eloquent letters written to us this week by our own rector, Bishop Dean Wolfe; by our Diocesan Bishop Andrew Dietsche; and by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. I commend each of them to you. [3]

We can resist these evils by staying, as Bishop Dietsche urges us, “committed to overcoming the racism which is still in our midst, overcoming prejudice against the LGBT community, overcoming the barriers to opportunity for women, overcoming rejection of the immigrant and de-legitimizing of those of other faiths.” And we need to start our resistance by looking first within our own hearts. “If there is a lesson to be taken from Charlottesville, it is not that evil is simply out there in the world—we knew that—but that the battle is longer than we thought it would be, it is harder than we imagined, and it begins in the human heart.”

Let us look first look honestly into our own hearts, with God’s help.

May we be nourished in our gathering, like we’re doing this morning, by God’s Word and prayer. May we be nourished here at this holy table, so that we may go out with our hearts strengthened, our hope renewed, and with new resolve and determination to resist evil.

A turning point.

[1] The Book of Common Prayer, pp 302-305.

[2] <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

[3] Bishop Wolfe’s letter: <http://stbarts.org/statement-in-response-to-the-violence-in-charlottesville-virginia/>

Bishop Dietsche’s letter:

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102067254998&ca=39522e6d-c124-429d-b3a4-1df1c67cc831>

Bishop Curry’s letter: <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/08/17/presiding-bishop-reflects-on-charlottesville-and-its-aftermath/>

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