

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Matthew 5:1-12

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Last week I preached a sermon about choosing to live with compassion rather than fear. Our scripture was the story of Jesus walking on the water towards the disciples when their boat was caught in a storm. I talked about medical professionals in Atlanta who voluntarily gave up their vacation time to care for patients coming from Africa with the Ebola virus. One of them said, "It's the right thing to do. We can care or we can fear."

I didn't know that this week would bring even more disheartening news. From the shooting in Ferguson, Missouri which erupted a firestorm of outrage, to Los Angeles, where we learned that a man who made us all laugh had been battling demons for years.

Both of these incidents created a barrage of news stories on traditional and social media, so that even if you wanted to escape them, you had a hard time doing so. Both of them tug at our conscience. They raise questions we should not ignore. They cause us to look at our nation, our society, just as we are, and ask, "Is this the best we can do?" Or can we do better? Can we create a culture where there is better understanding between people of different races, neighborhoods, classes, income brackets? Can we begin to break down the barriers that separate us?

Can we get rid, once and for all, of the taboos that exist, so that we can talk openly about mental illness and addictions just as we speak frankly about other diseases?

The Christian gospel speaks a word of hope. And, in a case of God's good timing, that word of hope today is perfectly appropriate for Back-to-School Sunday. That word of

hope is this: “What we teach our children matters.” What we teach our children makes a difference, in their lives, and in the world.

Let me give you two examples.

This is Eric Rudolph. You may remember him as the Olympic Park Bomber. He is responsible for a series of anti-abortion and anti-gay motivated bombings throughout the southern United States between 1996 and 1998, bombings which killed two people and injured 111 others. He spent five years on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list until he was caught in 2003.

When he was finally in court, he pled guilty. But he was not sorry. Not for the bomb that detonated at a women’s health care center in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed an off-duty police officer and left a nurse hobbled and half-blind. Not for the bomb that sent shock waves of fear at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. In fact, he was proud and defiant in court. He lectured the judge on the righteousness of his actions. He gloated as he recalled federal agents passing within steps of his hiding place. He quoted New Testament scripture.

Where did Eric Rudolph learn to become a person who would kill in the name of Christ?

As a teenager he was taken by his mother to a compound connected to the extremist Christian identity movement, a militant, racist and anti-Semitic organization that believes whites are God’s chosen people. There he was taught by a leading figure in the extremist Christian identity movement, a former high school principal. He was given books to read like one entitled, “Anne Frank’s Diary: A Hoax.”

During the five years that he was evading federal agents, people cheered him on, and helped him hide in the woods of North Carolina. The day he was finally caught, a

woman from the area was quoted as saying, “Rudolph’s a Christian and I’m a Christian. Those are our values. Those are our woods.”

What we teach our children matters.

A few years ago, two middle school teachers in Whitwell, Tennessee, conceived a creative, interactive way to teach their students about the Holocaust. Students began collecting paper clips. Their goal was to collect six million paper clips, one for each Jew murdered in the Holocaust. They asked for paper clips to be sent to them from around the world. They became so engaged in the quest that eventually that project led to the relocation of a German railcar [INSERT PICTURE OF RAILCAR] that was used to transport Jews to Auschwitz. Now that railcar, and the paper clip collection, has become a Holocaust memorial in the southeast corner of Tennessee. Middle school students give tours of the railcar. They ask guests to imagine how it might have felt to be one of the 70 or 80 Jews packed into that tight space, hearing the wheels clanking as the train took them to torture and death. They talk about the paper clips, how each one represents a soul. The sign at the entrance of the memorial reads, “We ask you to pause and reflect on the evil of intolerance and hatred.” The sign on the way out states: “What can I do to spread the message of love and tolerance these children have demonstrated with this memorial?”

One Whitwell student tour guide, about to graduate from eighth grade, reflects, “In the future, when I come back and see this memorial, it will be not just a memory, but it will be in my heart, that I’ve helped change the way people think about other people.”

Whitwell is a town of fewer than 2000 residents, located about a hundred miles from where the Ku Klux Klan was born. It is overwhelmingly white and Protestant.

Perhaps a surprising place for a Holocaust memorial. What Whitwell has are teachers. The principal of the middle school wanted the students in her school to learn about culture and about people who are different from themselves. “Our children,” she says, “they are respectful, they are thoughtful; they are caring. But they are pretty much homogeneous. When we come up to someone who is not like us, we don’t have a clue.” She sent a teacher to a diversity conference, and he came back with the idea of a Holocaust education project.

Lena Gitter, a 95-year-old Holocaust survivor, heard about the project and wrote the students a letter: “I witnessed what intolerance and indifference can lead to. I am thankful that late in life I can see and hear that the teaching of tolerance is alive and well and bears fruit. When you ask the young, they will do the right thing. With tears in my eyes, I bow my head before you. Shalom.”

What we teach our children matters.

The picture you’re seeing on the screen now is of a man named Eboo Patel. He is the founder of an organization called the Interfaith Youth Corps. On college campuses around the nation, students from Christian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds are meeting together and discussing how they can work together for social justice.

He has written a book called Acts of Faith which describes his passion for interfaith dialogue and his belief that it can make a real and positive difference in the world. In the book he talks about the importance of education. He has studied the root causes of religious extremism and learned that most people who commit violence in the name of religion learned their belief system in a well-run, well-funded youth program. He

asks the question, "Where are the well-run, well-funded youth programs teaching peacemaking, teaching justice, teaching tolerance?" He tells this story.

He was in a conversation with a well-meaning Protestant in a wealthy suburb just north of Chicago. He approached Patel after a talk he gave on the importance of youth programs in religious communities and made a sheepish confession: "My wife and I really enjoy the church we go to, but my daughter, she hates it. She thinks the services are boring, and she complains that there's no real youth program." Then he asked Patel offhandedly, "What do you suggest we do?" Patel said, without hesitation, "Change churches."

When the man looked taken aback, he said, "Either that or make sure that the church starts a youth program that interests your daughter. It's that important."

Patel has studied extensively the root causes of terrorism and violence in our world today. What he has learned is that faith, in itself, is neither the problem nor the solution. Within the major world religions, within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there are people working for peace, people who understand the core values of their religious teaching. And there are people within each of those religious traditions who distort their belief systems, who become extremists, whose twisted understandings lead them to justify violence.

His research concludes this, "Every time we read about a young person who kills in the name of God, we should recognize that an institution painstakingly recruited and trained that young person. And that institution is doing the same for thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of others like him. In other words, those religious extremists have invested in their youth programs."

What we teach our children matters. Patel says that, as he travels around this country, he sees far too few positive, healthy youth programs. Listen to his findings: “I cannot help but think of the number of teenagers I know who say that they are bored in their congregations, that their church or synagogue or mosque or temple has little going on for them. The youth minister they liked was let go because of budget cuts. The Habitat for Humanity trip they were planning got canceled because the adult supervisor couldn’t make it at the last minute. The pastor or imam or rabbi can never remember their names.”

And here is his conclusion: “Too many adults secretly consider the absence of young people in mainstream religious communities the natural course of events, viewing the kids as too self-absorbed, materialistic, and anti-authoritarian to be interested in religion. The result is that adults pay lip service to the importance of involving youth in faith communities but let themselves off the hook when it comes to actually building strong, long-lasting youth programs. Youth activities are typically the top item in a congregation’s newsletter but the last line in the budget...Many young Americans want religion to play an important role in their lives, but the faith communities do a poor job of involving them.”

I’m here this morning to thank the Avon Lake United Church of Christ for bucking the trend. Thank you for supporting a full-time Youth Director and a youth center. Thank you for volunteering to be youth group advisors, mission trip chaperones, confirmation mentors, Sunday School teachers.

We are making a difference, and it is the best investment we can make.