

Ubuntu

Rev. Gabi

The events in Charlottesville prompted me, encouraged by Bryan Stevens, to change the topic for this Sunday. Talking about “what is church”, is not urgent. Talking about the hatred that has led to so much suffering throughout the decades, is urgent, don’t you agree? I want to focus on this hatred because, I can not possibly tell you anything that you haven’t already heard or read about Charlottesville, about White Supremacists, about racism, about Zionism. Although I doubt there is even the smallest chance that I can come up with a solution to these problems. I myself am flabbergasted and deeply disturbed by the hatred I saw on the faces of these mostly young, mostly male, all white people, marching through the town of Charlottesville. I have also been dismayed, and terrified, by the hatred I read between the lines of the casual statements of many police officers who have shot unarmed black people. Just like I was unable to understand the hatred of hundreds of my countrymen during the Third Reich, who clearly felt enough hatred for Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals, to herd them into concentration camps and kill them.

Hatred is such a strong emotion, and I am at the point in my life where I can honestly say I do not feel hatred toward anyone or anything. For me, hatred is an emotion so powerful that it breaks the inherent, or call it “natural” taboo/inhibition “not to injure or maim”. In my youth and early adulthood I occasionally felt an emotion so strong that I was “seething with anger”. But I never lashed out with more than words. Maybe because I grew up in the years right after the Holocaust in Germany, my desire for non-violence and peace is even stronger than it might be for someone who’s never been exposed to mass murder or genocide.

Looking at it from a strictly UU viewpoint, I’ve come up with an “anatomy of hatred through the lens of our seven principles”.

- 1.If you hate someone based on any superficial markers like skin color, ethnicity, religion, you cannot possibly believe in the first principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- 2.Obviously, you cannot possibly affirm or even promote our second principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
- 3.You definitely will not accept others (if they are Black, Jewish, or gay) and encourage their spiritual growth, nor will you find them in your congregations.
4. If you feel such hatred, you are not searching for truth and meaning in a free and responsible way - instead, you will most likely adopt the truth and meaning of others, without much thought.
- 5.If you hate someone because of their skin color, ethnicity, or religion, you will deny their right to a democratic process;

6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all is definitely not one of your goals.

7. If you hate others, you clearly have no respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part; you possibly believe that the object of your hatred are not part of this world at all.

As I said in the beginning, I cannot tell you anything that you haven't already read somewhere. Trying to look for the answers to whether there is anything we can do about it, I turned to one of my favorite "advisors", namely Krista Tippett. When I typed in the word hatred in the search box of the "On Being" podcasts on her website, I was directed to a recording of a conversation she had in 2002 with South Africans, members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that started its work after the end of apartheid in South Africa. It is almost impossible for me to believe that most of the South Africans who have gone through so much suffering were able to reconcile after sharing their stories, speaking their truth - the truth in the way they had experienced it. But, what exactly is "truth" in the context of strong emotions?

Dr. Villa Valencia, a white theologian, offered this concept of truth: *"I think the notion truth has always been a contested concept. For me, theologically speaking, truth is something that one aspires after. It's something that you reach towards. And I think religion generally, and Christian theology in particular, is at its all-time low and most oppressive when it has a decisive interpretation of truth, in the sense of a dogma, and says, 'This is the truth.' And pastorally speaking, if you like, what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done is that it's opened a space within which people—we like to use the word, don't we, ordinary people, rank-and-file people—have an opportunity to speak their truth. Subjective truth may not always stand up to the cross examination of a court of law. It may not be the forensic truth. But if that is that person's experience of what happened, we, as Christians, above all, need to listen."* I believe you agree that not only Christians need to listen.

However, as I was reflecting on what I had heard in this interview, I realized that there are two different types of hate, and I believe it is important to distinguish between them. There is a. Hating someone for something that has been done to you by this person; or, b. Hating someone out of fear that this person might do something to you; seemingly often based on the fear that this person might take something away from you.

In the first case, it is in your power to forgive, to reconcile - because it is over! It is in the past. However, if your suffering might (or might not) happen in the future, your hatred cannot be rationalized away. You can't forgive, or reconcile with something that hasn't happened yet. It made me think of Chicken Little....a seemingly silly children's story that nevertheless teaches us not to believe everything others tell you, and not to be overly concerned with what might or might not happen in the future. Chicken Little had a minor unpleasant experience when something small fell on her head; but felt

completely powerless to do something about the larger impending doom. Out of her feeling of powerlessness (and a serious lack of street smarts) Chicken Little collects a gang of friends around her, and ends up believing everything others tell her. The ending is pretty nasty—I doubt Walt Disney would make a movie like that today.

As you probably know, young males do not take kindly to being or feeling powerless. So they gather friends around them. And you all know what happens next. I said “young white males” because those are the ones we saw marching in Charlottesville. Mostly young, mostly male, always white. But I would venture to say that behind those mostly young folks, probably causing a lot of the hatred, is a generation of older white folks. I did not understand why they would have a similar kind of fear of losing something that’s important to them. I did not understand what they were afraid of, or worried about.

I found answers when I watched a segment of a propaganda movie made in 1943 by the US War Department. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k0971Hy5eo> From the opening remarks of the middle aged agitator, it is pretty clear that he is worried about losing his “American-ness”. He claims that it is not “our America anymore”. (Was it ever?). In his understanding, America is losing something valuable if all those Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and Free Masons are allowed to stay here. But, what exactly is he worried about losing?

I found a partial answer in another “On Being” podcast, an interview with the African American civil rights activist and theologian Ruby Sales. At one point she says, *“What is it that public theology can say to the white person in Massachusetts who’s heroin-addicted? I don’t hear anyone speaking to the 45-year-old person in Appalachia who feels like they’ve been eradicated, because whiteness is so much smaller today than it was yesterday. Because there’s nothing wrong with being European-American; that’s not the problem. It’s almost like white people don’t believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed.”*

But then my next question popped up when I heard an interview with David Duke, recorded on the evening of the rallies in Charlottesville. By the way, David Duke is described in Wikipedia as a “white nationalist, politician, anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist, Holocaust denier, convicted felon, and former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan”—he’s probably proud of that description. He was asked by a reporter, *“What does this event mean to you?”* His answer, *“this event represents a turning point for the people in this country. We are determined to take this country back, we’re going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump, that’s what we believe in, and that’s why we voted for him, that’s what we are going to do”*. Who took the country away from him? When? I must have missed that on the news.

One of the problems we are facing is that hatred does not go away on its own. I had one of those “Duh!” moments about a year and a half ago, when Black Lives Matter started, and we had a discussion in my congregation in State College after my service

on White Privilege. Something I had not considered before came up when a young Muslim, a frequent visitor, said *“you know, after desegregation, black people had more legal rights. But, you know, the folks who hated blacks until then, they did not stop hating them from that moment on.”*

So, what do we do? Is there anything we can do?

Would it make sense to hope for time to heal the hatred of white supremacists? None at all. As I pointed out earlier, overcoming hatred based on something that might or might not happen in the future is impossible. It would take centuries of evolution to prove that people of different races or ethnicities mean no harm....I doubt that the average African American or Jew is willing to wait that long, in constant fear of being killed.

So this is where the African Word “Ubuntu” comes in, the title of this sermon. I learned the term a few years ago when preparing a service about Kwanzaa. “Ubuntu” loosely translated means “humanity”. It means to live together. It is a concept that says, “I am through you and you are through me”. Or: “I am because you are.” What a simple way to point out the importance of human relationship! It states that to the extent I am estranged from you, I am less than human. It’s a relationship that is required. It’s only as we engage in a quest for building a relationship that we can grow as individual people. In order to build those relationships, we need to learn about the life of those who have such radically different beliefs, but also about the disenfranchised, their struggles, their pain.

Most of us might know that the cashier at Weis or Giant might be working 2 jobs to make ends meet; but we don’t know their story, we don’t know what it means to live with the constant worry about making ends meet, to have a decision between seeing a doctor and pay the rent, etc. We don’t know their stories. Our society has become so divided—we live in different neighborhoods, we shop at different stores, we watch different news programs. We even go to different churches.

But how on earth can we build relationships with folks who think very differently? I only know of one way: Listen to their stories. Yes, like it or not, we also need to listen to the stories of the white supremacists. Maybe start small, invite a dialogue with a fundamentalist Christian, with the only intention to listen, and to honor where they come from. Not to challenge what they are saying. Their truth and your truth might be very different! Their fears and your fears are definitely different. I am sure most of you have had irrational fears at one point in your life—as kids you were sure that there was a monster under your bed; as an adult you postponed surgery again and again because you just know that you will die. It is absolutely not helpful if your parent or best friend tells you that this fear is irrational! It only makes it worse, because now you feel stupid and less-than-normal, on top of the anxiety. As a parent you know: if your child cries, your first question will be “Where does it hurt”?

That's what Ruby Sales says, too: "*We have to ask these people who are filled with hatred: 'Where does it hurt?'*" In other words: What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination, and when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying? Ruby adds: "*that's why Donald Trump is essential, because although we don't agree with him, people think he's speaking to that pain that they're feeling*". Active listening might be the first step for us to learn to understand the angst.

You will soon find out that I just love food metaphors. So here I'm thinking of a batch of soup that tastes absolutely awful. There is nothing you can do to not repeat that culinary disaster again, until you find out what the reason for that horrible taste is. Did you burn it? Did you put in too much salt or garlic? Or did you forget an essential ingredient? Whatever the reason is, there is no way to make a better soup unless you know what went wrong, and then not repeat that mistake or watch out for this potential mishap. Yes, I know, cooking is easy compared to what we are facing now in this country. So—I ask YOU: What is the missing "ingredient", or what do we have too much of? I'll let you think about it while Bryan Stevens is going to sing for us. When he's done, I'll invite your answers!