

Beyond Fear

sermon digest

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I John 4: 7-12, 19-21

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I suspect you have read about it in the newspaper or at least encountered word of it in *Ekklesia*. A group of Oak Ridge citizens have organized over the last year to enlist our community in the Not in Our Town (NIOT) effort to confront and put an end to hatred and bullying. Consisting at this point of 100 communities spread across the nation, the Not in Our Town effort began in Billings, Montana, where it is now based. You may have heard the story of its origins. A young Jewish boy placed a menorah in his window in observance of Passover. Someone threw a rock through the window, committing what would become classified as a hate crime; and the community responded. The *Billings Gazette* reported the incident and printed a paper menorah, which they invited Billings residents to hang in their windows. Ten thousand people responded, voicing together their decided opposition to such bigotry and hatred. Out of that effort the Not in Our Town movement was born, flying under the motto “Working together for safe, inclusive communities.” If you have not had a chance to become acquainted with the local effort, I suggest you go online and view the video featuring Oak Ridge youth (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PGEXvI0Prc&feature=youtu.be>) or attend the September 8 Women’s Interfaith meeting (men are also welcome) in fellowship hall (11 a.m.).

This Thursday the Not in Our School component of the program will kick off at Oak Ridge High School with the aim of enlisting students in the effort to prevent bullying. Nationwide between 1 in 4 and 1 in 3 students indicate they have experienced bullying. We have increasingly come to recognize that, more than a harmless ritual of growing up, bullying can have a devastating impact on young lives, even becoming the occasion for suicide—a reality movingly described by Joseph, a young man featured in the local NIOT video and in the YouTube video, “I Remembered Why I Want to Live” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=FEt6zE3prNA).

The question we must ask this morning is what is our role as citizens and as a part of Christ’s church in the face of the discrimination, hatred and violence, loose in our community, nation and world? Are we simply helpless bystanders, feeling bad, of course, for the suffering involved and praying for the victims? Is our calling simply to be content with thinking happy, even pious thoughts, while sticking our heads in the sand? Or are we commissioned to be a people of real hope, tasked with effectively working to dismantle the structures of fear and prejudice wherever they may crop up between us and putting in their place bridges of understanding and love?

It all depends. As people of faith, it depends on how we see God and, in response, how we understand our place in the world we proclaim to be God’s handiwork.

Putting concern and action on behalf of those who suffer at front and center of who we are and what we do is in keeping with the drumbeat of our faith. As a matter of fact, it is in keeping with the drumbeat of the Torah, the prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, the call of Jesus—you name it. Concern for the widow and the orphan, for the poor and oppressed, for the alien in one’s midst reaches into the deep recesses of Israel’s faith. “Nothing,” the esteemed James Muilenburg tells us, “is more clear than that the God of Israel has a special concern for the weak, the poor, the disinherited, the alien, and all who stand in need” [*The Way of Israel*, 72]. God, the psalmists tell us, is a God of compassion. God’s steadfast love “is from everlasting to everlasting.” It is a love, the prophets Amos and Isaiah inform us, that includes not only Israel, but, surprisingly, the Ethiopians, Philistines, Assyrians, and Egyptians—Israel’s own enemies—as well (Amos 9:7; Isaiah 19:23).

If today we consider that in any way the bar of concern has been lowered in our own faith and practice, we should be clear that it was not lowered by Jesus, who invested his entire ministry in reaching out to those considered outside the pale of legitimate society and God’s concern. “In Christ,” Paul says, “God was reconciling the world,” breaking down the walls of hostility between us and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. And in the Epistle of John, “God is love,” and “those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars.” Love, John tells us, breaks down our fears of one another and puts us to the task of caring for rather than seeking to alienate and destroy one another.

“Who is your God?”—the basic question of Christian ethics—is determinative, for it is followed by a second question: “Who then am I to be?” If God is reliable, if God’s love is indeed “from everlasting to

everlasting,” if God was indeed in Christ reconciling the world, the picture of who we are called to be in the world is dramatically altered. If God is love, is it not terribly inconsistent for Christ’s church to hold God’s love and mercy to ourselves even as we unleash campaigns of bitterness and rejection upon those who are different from us? If God is about the reconciling work of removing walls of enmity and building loving relationships, does this not indicate where those who love God should busy themselves? If God is about the task of alleviating our fears and bidding us into a future with hope, should those who serve God not also be propelled by hope, rather than stampeded by fear?

Concern for the widow and the orphan, the poor and oppressed, the newcomer, the minority, the most disadvantaged and despised among us reaches into the deep recesses of the faith of Israel, of Jesus and his church and calls us to into gracious and effective action on behalf of the least of these.

The hope to which we are called enables us to look the realities that surround us in the face and go on hoping (and working) still. And what does Jesus and his church have to offer the widows, the orphans, the maligned and disadvantaged of our world? Hope in the face of death? Hope that survives death and hopes still? Yes. We might use different imagery from that of the first century, and we may differ from one another about just what the nature of that hope is, but it is a fundamental component of our faith.

Our hope, however, is not just about the sweet by-and-by. It is also about the difficult and even treacherous here-and-now. It is not hope as wishful thinking. It is, in the words of Clarence Jordan, about “the turning of dreams into deeds” and “betting your life on the unseen realities” [*Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews 11:1*]. It is about looking the injustices and suffering of our world in the eye and extending every fiber of our beings to make a difference. Hope is about compassion embodied in the committed, long term, day-by-day exertion of our lives.

We are familiar with the enmity and hatred that besets our world. As we pick up our daily newspapers, we are moved by the near hysteria that seems to hold so much of our public deliberations in its grip. Neighbor is set over against neighbor; interest group against interest group; party against party; ethnic group against ethnic group. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups in our country has increased by 56 percent since 2000 to 939 identified groups [splcenter.org/what-we-do]. And according to the FBI’s 2012 hate crime statistics report, 5,796 hate crime incidents were reported by law enforcement agencies. Almost half were racially motivated; almost a fifth resulted from sexual orientation bias and another fifth from religious bias [fbi.gov/news/stories/2013/november/annual-hate-crime-statistics]. Hope is not about hiding our heads in the sand or merely looking forward to the sweet by-and-by. It is about giving ourselves to building an alternative way. True, the Not in Our Town effort may come to naught. Some, not willing to be bothered, are ready to dismiss it as a pipe dream that will soon evaporate into thin air. And true, no effort, no program will wipe away the hostility in our midst with the sweep of a hand. But should not people who call themselves by Christ’s name throw themselves in the struggle at some point and leave no stone unturned in the work to bring reconciliation, peace and justice into our communities?

“We will be an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God’s children.” So says our Grace Covenant. What about our lives? Our priorities? Our presence in the midst of our community and world? If one thing could be said about us, could it be that day-in-and-out we are moved, motivated and thoroughly shaped by a consuming desire to give expression to God’s reconciling presence in all we are and do?

So, how about it? Will we be guided by fear? Or love?