

Genesis 45:1-15 and Matthew 15:21-28

Our time away last week was a boost for the heart...that is for sure! First, I officiated for the small and intimate wedding of Philip May and Ann Wetherbee...you may remember that this couple met while volunteering for one of our Thanksgiving Dinners, 8 years ago. Their wedding took place on a gorgeous mountaintop surrounded by nature's beauty in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont! They are such a loving couple and what an honor it was to share in their ceremony, while Jeff enthusiastically took pictures.

Then we drove to the other side of Vermont to meet up with friends from Colombia, South America whom we both knew when Jeff was in the Peace Corps and I was teaching English there, 44 years ago. It felt like a miracle to see this mother, Cecilia, and her daughter, Adriana. ...So much love. This mother with whom I lived when I was 21 hugged me tightly and said she never imagined she would see me again....this was all in Spanish but somehow the words came back and we conversed with heart and soul.

When I read about how Joseph and his brother "wept on each other's necks"... I understand. I was so touched that Cecilia and her daughter continue to hold us in their love, all these years. My Colombian mama and her beautiful daughter.

Let us be in prayer: Infinitely loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

So it was a jolt when we came back, and faced the news of a terribly "unloving" and hostile display of bigotry and hatred in Charlottesville. I cannot ignore this event and pretend that this element in our society is not there. I need to "look again."

Joseph's brothers "looked again" to see unbelievably that the brother with whom they had chastised and almost put to death...was now before them, a man of power who seemed to have God leading him as he had saved Pharaoh and Egyptians from a great famine by predicting the drought and storing food.

When his brothers came to Egypt to get food, they wept when, miracle of miracle, their brother Joseph was not revengeful towards them but reached out his hand offering forgiveness...and love....they wept on each other's necks.

The Rev. Tracy Blackmon, our new UCC Justice and Witness Minister who works for our national office, was interviewed on TV. She was invited to participate with other clergy to hold a worship service in Charlottesville at the same time as the demonstration by those proclaiming white superiority. Maybe you heard her on MSNBC. She said a large crowd was praying and singing in the church when they were told that a mob was coming and it was not safe for them to stay there.... So they got in cars and left by back alleys but some clergy were approached by the mob chanting racist remarks and holding clubs and torches...others in the crowd fought them...and she said, it was to protect the clergy and the other peaceful demonstrators.

Jesus had a confrontation with a woman from Canaan, a woman different from his own Jewishness, but she came to him begging him to have mercy on her and to heal her daughter who was tormented by a demon. Perhaps it was a mental illness, or epilepsy. She hoped that Jesus would have compassion for them. The disciples wanted to send her away...her shouting bothered them. She was not from the "house of Israel"... But she comes and kneels at Jesus' feet and begs again...."Please, help me."

In one of Jesus' less attractive moments, he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But cleverly she responds..."But, my Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Jesus had to look again....at himself, at her....and he extends his love and healing prayers. He had to look again and see that his own rudeness might prevent the love of God from being at work. He had to look at her and realize that even in her differences, she deserved better, that she loved her daughter and only wanted what every other mother longs for. He had to look again and check his own response.

In our times right now, we must look again. Who are the people rallying under Nazi flags and racist slogans? We all are stunned at the numbers and wonder where they have come from and how to respond?

Brian McLaren, a prominent Christian pastor, author and activist, has written: "What I Saw in Charlottesville." He also was one of the clergy invited to witness against white supremacy which he says is counter to Christian gospel and democracy. He was there to bring a message of conciliation and peace and to support the clergy of Charlottesville.

Here is what he observed: The White Supremacists were organized, arriving in white rented vans and quickly lining up with Nazi and Confederate flags and beginning to march. They were young and mostly white males. They looked like they came

expecting to fight, threaten and intimidate, some in paramilitary garb, some heavily armed, shouting racist remarks. They were about a thousand strong.

On the clergy side, Brian says he has never seen a faith community come together in such a powerful and beautiful way. All denominations; Black, white, Latino, and Asian clergy stood side by side; Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others marched, prayed, and sang as allies. It was courageous. A group of clergy linked arms and walked to the very center of the hate-filled demonstration and sang their prayers...many were spat on, subjected to slurs and insults and exposed to tear gas.

He says, "Other clergy and faith leaders joined me in a march to a Methodist church where we helped medics, sang and provided water and other support to those protesting the racism. We ran to the scene after the driver drove into the crowd and ministered to the injured. We tried to create "safe places" and someone told me, "Thank God, you clergy are here."

McLaren believes that young white men are being radicalized and it is not a problem that is going to go away fast. He says that every family, all pastors, churches, and communities need to find ways to reach out to those who may be influenced by hate-filled propaganda.

It was hopeful, indeed, to see such crowds of people in Boston proclaiming that white supremacy and all other forms of racism and injustice must be replaced with something better – the beloved community where all are welcome, all are safe, and all are free.

Like Jesus on that day when the woman got him to wake up and look at what he was really saying...we need to look at ourselves and our own beloved community... Are there ways we might be even more welcoming to others in our community?

Ruby Sales, a Black Civil Rights activist who had a white man take a bullet for her during a demonstration years ago, was interviewed by Krista Tippett. She was talking about Black Folk Religion that had its roots, not in churches, but in outdoor gatherings of slaves, under trees and in the fields; that a theology of inclusion, agape, love, and acceptance rose up through ordinary people interpreting the stories of the Bible and creating songs of hope. She said every 7-year old girl grew up knowing many songs like: "I love everybody in my heart." And "Jesus loves the little children."

Do we "love everybody in our hearts?" And here comes the hard question that keeps haunting me, how could I *love* white supremacists...in my heart? How might I see beyond the façade to the child of God in them? Ruby Sales said that we must insist on seeing the goodness...and never give up....on *anybody*. I have to break open my own prejudices.

A writer in Yes! Magazine says that we all need to look within our own selves...to root out any ugly parts there. This is where we have some control. Perhaps we so vehemently condemn white supremacists because we hate any part of that attitude that might lurk within ourselves?

Lastly, when I got back and the news was just filling the airways of the demonstrations in Charlottesville, I wanted to put some kind of sign out in front of our church. We have talked about putting rainbow flags, welcome to immigrant signs; or perhaps colorful banners announcing love, compassion, courage and hope....but in the night these words came to me:

Take care of the love in your heart. Take care...of the love that is in your heart. Perhaps people who drive by might think, "Oh, I do have LOVE in my heart...how am I taking care of that? Jesus had to look again at his own love for a woman needing help...Joseph looked again at his brothers with love and forgiveness in his heart. How do we take care of the love in our hearts...toward...every person ...with prayers of blessing and good will? Let's do this together!

Amen....