

Penny's Pastoral Letter – August 18, 2017

Dear beloved community,

As a community of faith, who upholds the dignity and worth of all people, we cannot be silent about the events going on in our country and the social climate in which we find ourselves. A few days from now, we will experience a rare total eclipse. The moon will obscure the sun and casts its lunar shadow over the earth, blanketing the U.S. in darkness. What a metaphor.

As a historically white church, we must be the first to speak up and speak out against the white supremacy and white nationalism that lie at the heart of the events in Charlottesville. Our first impulse, for those of us who are white, is to distance ourselves from the extremism and hate. In distancing ourselves it is too easy to remain blind to our uninterrupted legacy of benefiting from a system that oppresses others and denies them the opportunities afforded us. It is our invitation, and moreover it is our calling, to do the hard work of facing our own collusion with the system tainted by these evils.

While we may be unsettled and even horrified to see a white mob marching down the street with torches, it doesn't re-traumatize us the way it does our African-American brothers and sisters, or our Jewish brothers and sisters. For them, a deep wound is reopened, a wound that is never allowed to completely heal because of the unrelenting racism and anti-Semitism they experience in their daily lives. We know that Charlottesville was not a singular event but rather a symptom of our national illness.

As your pastor, I always want to provide hope—and I do have hope. However, it cannot be a false hope or an empty hope. It must be hope that arises from a will to act. A hope embedded in clarity. A hope that does not rest in our government but rests in the heart of God and is embodied by people of faith and good will across our land.

As a Christian church, we need to face our history and learn from it. During the rise of Nazism, very few Christian churches in Germany spoke out. The stark truth is that most Christian churches turned a blind eye to the genocide going on around them. In our own country, the majority of white Christian churches did not speak out against slavery or institutional racism. In fact most churches were the last institutions to integrate and 11 o'clock on Sunday remains one of the most segregated hours of the week.

Time to change our track record.

What can we do? First, we look within. The real work for those of us who are white is to be courageous enough to examine and to face what it means to be white in a nation that was basically built with us in mind. Facing our own complicity

and untangling ourselves from our unconscious biases is hard work but the reality is little will change unless we do this hard work together.

In seeking to change our nation, we must denounce white supremacy but not fall into the same trap of dehumanizing others, especially those with whom we so vehemently disagree. We need to reject their ideology while still believing that no person is beyond redemption.

In forging a way ahead, we must follow the teachings of Jesus.

Our UCC leaders, in their pastoral letter this week, encouraged us to follow Jesus who “stood with the oppressed, spoke out against political and religious powers, and courageously embodied a just world for all as he sought to create it. Today, we must follow the ways of Jesus in addressing the hatred of white supremacists and racists among us.”

They go on with a call for action: “Our local UCC churches must be true solidarity partners with those who march in the streets. Our UCC churches are encouraged to move from the sanctuary and walk alongside other clergy and community leaders who seek to resist, agitate, inform, and comfort. We must resist hatred and violence. We must also agitate ourselves, and our neighbors to acknowledge any racism within or among us.”

Michael Eric Dyson has written a book, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon for White America*. He wrote an op-ed in the New York Times this week and his final paragraph has haunted me for days: *Now is the time for every decent white American to prove he or she loves this country by actively speaking out against the scourge this bigotry represents. If such heinous behavior is met by white silence, it will only cement the perception that as long as most white folk are not immediately at risk, then all is relatively well. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, and nothing could more clearly declare the moral bankruptcy of our country.*

We have a responsibility as people of faith *and* as citizens to not be silent. May God give us the strength and courage to shoulder that responsibility together. That's what beloved community is for – to draw strength from one another as we do the work of peace and justice together.

The sun will not be obscured for long. Darkness will not prevail. Light will return. Because light is stronger than darkness, and love is more powerful than hate. This we must believe. This we must make evident by our lives.

Peace, grace and love, always,

Penny