

The Rev. Kerry R. Mansir  
Sermon for May 22, 2022

This past Tuesday, there was a small group of us gathered outside for worship, just me and Barbara and Carol. When it came time for the “sermon,” I wanted to talk about the shooting at the Buffalo Supermarket, to pray for those who had been killed and their families, and to share a letter written in response by Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop who grew up in Buffalo. But I found that I couldn’t find the words to articulate much. The tears came, and the three of us spent a couple of minutes in silent prayer and meditation before we could exchange any words about Buffalo.

Sometimes, more important than finding the right words when something terrible has happened, is just making space for the grief.

But on top of grief, an emotion that has gripped me all week is hopelessness. Because I thought about the Episcopal Church’s attempts to combat racism and white supremacy. I thought about the work many of us have done in this church with the Sacred Ground curriculum which has helped us understand the history of race relations in our nation and the ways that white supremacy is built into our very systems of government and even into the power structures of our church.

And then I thought...all for what? Is it making a difference? Are our book groups and anti-racism curriculum doing any good? How does the work we’re doing ever stop a white supremacist like Payton Gendron, who believes that there is an agenda to replace the white people of this country with people of color, from walking into a supermarket that he chose because it is in a predominantly black neighborhood, and gunning people down? How do you fight that sort of depravity and evil?

I just don’t know anymore. But I also know that a sense of hopelessness is dangerous. So as I read through commentaries this week about the lectionary readings...readings about the apostles preparing for the absence of Jesus, Paul traveling through Asia Minor in search of disciples, and John of Patmos writing from his island of exile ... as I read their stories of struggle, I came across the phrase, “defiant hope,” and I clung to it.

“Defiant hope,” I imagine that’s the only kind of hope that will work for us these days. A hope that defies the reality we see around us. A hope that insists things can and will be different.

But how?

Whenever I am feeling particularly hopeless about any progress we’re making regarding race in our country, I listen to an interview of Ruby Sales, famous Civil Rights Activist, by Krista Tippet, the host of “On Being.” I have listened to this interview half a dozen times now. I love so many things she says in it like how, even in the segregated, Jim Crow, South with all its violence, at the Black Baptist Church where she grew up, they sang, “I love everybody, I love everybody, I love everybody in my heart.” Hate was not in her vocabulary, she claims. And she would not let the hatred that others felt toward people of her race become part of who she was.

I still love that part of her interview, but something different stood out for me when I listened to the interview this time. A point she was trying to make that I think I missed before. And it almost felt like a challenge.

Ruby Sales begins by telling Krista Tippet that there is a spiritual crisis in White America. And the way that she wants us to dig into that spiritual crisis, to try to heal it...is to ask, "Where does it hurt?"

Now what she's saying, if I understand her correctly, is such a Jesus thing to say. She is suggesting that even the racist, white supremacist folks who are fighting to uphold systemic racism need to be asked, "Where does it hurt?" She goes on to talk about some of the reasons for their hurt like the fragmentation of modern culture, an unraveling of community life, drug addiction, people being forced to do work that is neither valued nor rewarded with fair wages. Her way of understanding what it means to be human leads her to believe that it is these kinds of deep hurts that lead to the hatred of and sometimes violence toward black people in our country. And if we don't understand that hurt...if we don't address those hurts, we won't ever make progress toward a more loving world.

She goes on to ask..."Who is speaking to the pain of white people who have been told that their value is in their whiteness?" If we're going to break that down, we need to offer a theology to people that says our value isn't in the color of our skin. This isn't about being ashamed of whiteness but about insisting that we all have intrinsic value as the children of God.

She even asks this hard question of progressive white people like many of us in this room..."Do we even believe that those white folks who see the world differently than we do are worthy of redemption?" Because if we don't believe they can be redeemed, then what hope do we have of eradicating the hate we see in the world. The hate that leads to violence. The hate that led to the deaths at that Buffalo grocery store.

And if we believe that everyone is worthy of redemption, Sales is asking us to go and talk to the white people in our communities, particularly those who cling to racist ideologies. Those pushing false narratives like the white replacement theory that seems to have been the motivation for the killings in Buffalo.

I imagine that this call may be the biggest challenge of all.

Valarie Kaur, a civil rights leader today who is Indian and Sikh, makes a similar request of us in her response to the shootings in Buffalo. She, like Ruby Sales, calls us into conversation with those we view as "opponents." She says that we need to reach out to our colleagues, our neighbors, and our relatives who subscribe to the dangerous belief of replacement theory...and she doesn't say to just tell them why they're wrong and racist. She encourages us to open a channel for deep listening and sharing stories in an effort to stop the spread of misinformation.

If you're listening to this, and thinking, but how...I don't have an easy answer. I suspect there isn't an easy answer...otherwise, we wouldn't be in the mess that we're in. But maybe we're being called to try things like choosing not to use social media as the platform for sharing our beliefs and convincing others they're wrong, and instead, engaging in real conversations. Maybe it means that when we encounter someone who has a different worldview than we do, rather than shutting the door on them or responding in anger, we get curious and listen to their stories. This doesn't mean we don't speak for what we think is just and true, but we make space for civility and sharing.

Valarie Kaur calls this the work of revolutionary love where we don't just labor for ourselves, but for our opponents. Kind of like Jesus telling us to love our enemies. Valarie Kaur and Ruby Sales, like Jesus, are calling us to believe in the redemption of all people. In our Christian narrative, we say that Christ reconciled all the world to himself, and all the people in this world. And we're called to live like we believe that, even when it's hard. Even while acknowledging the violence and evil in the world.

So I'll end today by naming those killed in Buffalo.  
Celestine Chaney, Roberta Drury, Andre Mackniel, Katherine Massey, Margus Morrison, Heyward Patterson, Aaron Salter, Ruth Whitfield, Gerri Talley, Pearly Young. And let us pray for those who were injured: Zaire Goodman, Jennifer Warrington, and Christopher Braden

We stand in love with their grieving families. And we commit ourselves to the long and difficult road of revolutionary love for all God's people. Amen.