

## LOVE ONE ANOTHER

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Matthew 15:1-20

Which is more important: to love God with your actions or to love God with your heart? Of course, we know that it is far better to love God with our hearts. God is not fooled by empty rituals emerging from an empty heart. Our reading today from the gospel of Matthew involves a rather complicated dispute between Jesus and some of the Jewish leaders. Here, Jesus argues that religious actions carry no weight when they are performed cynically. For example, any sacrifice in the temple, no matter how exorbitant it might be, is meaningless to God if the giver does not embrace God in their heart. An offering to the temple does not impress God if its purpose is to impress others.

Matthew's congregation was largely Jewish and his people no doubt carried many Jewish practices into their Christian lives. One question they would have wrestled with would have been, "how do we integrate our Jewish heritage into our new lives as disciples of Christ?" Matthew teaches his people that Jesus came as fulfillment of the Law, not to throw it out. But what about the dozens, if not hundreds, of observances and practices that shaped everyday Jewish life? What becomes of these—what to eat, when to work, how to pray, how to sacrifice, and more?

To address these concerns by his people, Matthew offers today's reading—this encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. In this passage, the Pharisees interrogate Jesus on why his disciples do not wash their hands before they eat—a standard ritual practice. In response, Jesus points out that the Pharisees routinely void the word of God by not consistently obeying God's Law. It's a complicated argument that I'm going to skip today. But in it Jesus indicts the leadership for their capricious and convenient adherence to God's Law. Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites and quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying, *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me.* In other words, the Pharisees accuse the disciples of not observing the Law and Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being selective in their adherence to the Law.

Jesus then turns from the Pharisees and addresses the crowd saying to them, *It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.* Peter asks Jesus to explain this parable about what defiles a person. Jesus tells Peter that the food that we eat goes into the mouth. It follows the digestive tract through the stomach, and then out into the sewer. That waste which comes from food is not something that defiles us; it does not make us dirty. What defiles a person are the evil words which come out of one's mouth. Words, which Jesus says, originate in the heart. The evil intentions that we utter such as

*murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander*, these are the things that truly defile us, that make us unclean.

I was drawn to this passage in Matthew following the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, two weeks ago. (I would have addressed this last week but we had an eclipse to deal with.) Two weekends ago, a large group of people converged on Charlottesville ostensibly to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from a city park. I say ostensibly because immediately it became clear that these people were not so much proponents of Southern historical monuments as they were klansmen, neo-nazis, white nationalists, white supremacists, and independent militia groups. Collectively, today we refer to them as the alt-right. Although this march was scheduled for Saturday, on Friday night they assembled in the park carrying torches and then marched across the campus of the University of Virginia chanting such slogans as “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us.”<sup>1</sup> People in the march were waving Confederate battle flags, nazi insignias, and wearing klan robes. There could be no doubt what this group stood for.

There were also counter-protesters in Charlottesville. Their presence was intended as a statement to the protesters proclaiming, “We do not believe what you believe. We will not allow your hatred to define our country.”

Unfortunately, when the protesters met the counter-protesters there was violence. On Saturday morning there was fighting, weapons were fired,<sup>2</sup> objects were thrown, chemical sprays were deployed, and much more.

Tragically, three people died that day. Two law enforcement officers died when the helicopter they were using to patrol the city crashed. The third victim was a thirty-two-year-old woman named Heather Heyer who was murdered by a white supremacist who purposely drove his car down the street into a crowd of counter-protesters. He injured nineteen people and killed Heather Heyer. Ms. Heyer worked as a paralegal at a law firm in Charlottesville. Her boss described her as a person who always stood up against “any type of discrimination.”<sup>3</sup>

The driver of the car was a 20-year-old man from Ohio named James Fields. He has a record of domestic abuse including abuse against his wheelchair-bound mother.<sup>4</sup> Although Fields was the only person to use a car that day as a weapon,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/08/15/us/ap-us-confederate-monument-protest-what-happened.html?mcubz=0>

<sup>2</sup> <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/us/charlottesville-protest-police.html?referer=https://t.co/9Np2jwMAfr?amp=1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/heather-heyer-charlottesville-victim.html?mcubz=0>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/james-alex-fields-domestic-violence\\_us\\_599221bde4b08a247276ba28](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/james-alex-fields-domestic-violence_us_599221bde4b08a247276ba28)

reporters have uncovered chatter on social media by Charlottesville protesters fantasizing how they could use cars and trucks to mow down the counter-protesters.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the protesters convened in Charlottesville motivated by their intense hatred and fear of people who are different than they are.

On Tuesday following the protests, the president appeared to try and level the situation by saying, “You also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” That is not correct. On one side you had hate-filled racism. On the other you had those who opposed these views. The president's attempt to make each side equal by saying there were fine people on each side is an argument of moral equivalence.

Let's say you and I are having an argument. We are arguing over what is the best color in a box of crayons. I argue for passionately Magenta and you are firm that the best color is Mango Tango. Our discussion may get heated, but in the end, this argument is morally balanced. It's just one crayon versus another. The argument has a moral equivalency.

Now imagine a different scenario. A group of convicts escape from prison and obtain weapons. They are holed up in a house and surrounded by the police. The convicts have guns pointed at the police and the police have guns pointed at the convicts. Looking at this situation you could say that it is morally balanced—two groups pointing guns at one another. But it is not. The guys in the house are bad and the police are good. The convicts seek violence and pose a threat to society. The police are there to protect society. There is no moral equivalence in this equation. You cannot say there are good guys on both sides. There clearly are not. In Charlottesville, the protesters were racists representing organizations with long histories of violence, intimidation, and terror. They are not—by the norms of society—fine people.

As people of faith we can love these people, we can pray for them, but we don't have to accept or condone their beliefs or behavior. We should not tolerate their words and actions because they go against the norms and values of our nation. In our Declaration of Independence, the second paragraph begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Sadly, our nation has a pretty poor history of upholding those words. Ironically, they were written when many were held in slavery. These words remain, however, words we aspire to. The ongoing struggle to make these words a reality is central to the great experiment that is our democracy.

Any discussion of our nations' values is part of a secular conversation. As citizens of the United States we are called to adhere to the Constitution and the laws of the land, to champion the values of equality, liberty, and service.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/leaked-alt-right-chat-logs-are-key-to-charlottesville-lawsuits>

As people of faith we have an additional calling. As Christians, we are called to be followers of our Christ, to adhere to his teachings and word. Our laws are the commandments of God; our values are the words of Jesus.

Chief among these beliefs is the conviction that we should love God with all our being. We should love our neighbor as ourselves. We should forgive those who persecute us. As far as our attitude towards those who are different than us the scriptures have quite a lot to say. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28). The basic tenet of scripture here is that all people are God's children and equal because they are equal in God's eyes. As Paul writes in the letter to the Colossians, *There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!* (Col 3:11). And do not forget Jesus' command to his followers, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Mt 28:19). In Ephesians, Paul again reminds us that we are equal in God's eyes when he writes, *be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you* (Eph 4:32). In the Gospel of John, Jesus' words are especially relevant here, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another* (John 13:34).

It seems pretty clear that as Christians we are to love all people equally. We are not to judge people by their faith, race, color, nationality, gender, or anything else about how God made them. We are not to hold ourselves as superior over others. We are all children of God.

Nevertheless, none of us are perfect, and too often words do flow from our mouths that we quickly regret—words that defile us. But we know that God's forgiveness is present for us. We seek to be changed, to become better in our lives. God does not give up on us and we should not give up on the sinners around us.

We must stand up to those who promote hatred and bigotry and violence. But we also pray for them. And when the opportunity arises, forgive them, as God has forgiven us.

Marissa Blair was a friend of Heather Heyer and was with her when she was killed. She told a reporter, "I've never had a close friend like this be murdered." But in response to Heather's death, Ms. Blair has been changed. She said, "We thought, 'What would Heather do?' Heather would go harder. So that's what we're going to do. We're going to preach love. We're going to preach equality, and Heather's death won't be in vain."

May we do the same. Amen.