A Reflection on Charlottesville

Excerpt from a sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque, on August 13, 2017.

Text: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Many, if not most, of us have probably experienced family strife to one degree or another. We can relate to having that one family member, like Joseph, with whom we’ve never gotten along, that one family member of whom we’ve always been jealous, that one family member who has made us so angry we’ve wanted to kill them. Of course, we probably never seriously contemplated killing them or selling them into slavery, though these things continue to happen today in the twenty-first century in families all around the world. Instead, we have our equivalent ways of throwing troublesome family members into a pit. We may try to avoid them at all costs – not returning their phone calls or emails, and trying to hide from them at family gatherings. We may stop speaking to them – for years in some cases. We may refuse to forgive them for something they said or did.

Sometimes we may treat family members in these ways out of a need for self-preservation – we just can’t deal with the person and remain healthy ourselves. But more often than not, I think, we believe that by these behaviors we are somehow punishing the person – by avoiding them, by not speaking to them, by refusing to forgive them – when we really are only punishing ourselves. When we are at odds with a relative, when there is conflict and strife in the family, along with it comes the gnawing feelings of grief and sorrow, of hurt and anger, of guilt and regret. Those feelings can eat us up inside. The unresolved tensions that linger within us can tear us apart.

It’s not a good place to be. But that is the place we sometime find ourselves, not only within our own families, but sometimes in the larger human family as well.

Joseph’s brothers hated their little brother “and could not speak peaceably to him.” It seems to me that we are seeing that same dynamic of hate-filled conflict played out in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, this weekend, where hundreds of white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan members marched across the campus of the University of Virginia on Friday night, carrying torches and chanting “White lives matter!” “You will not replace us!” and “Jews will not replace us!” On Saturday, the governor of Virginia declared a State of Emergency in the city as the white nationalists, some of them armed with assault rifles, gathered for a “Unite the Right” rally to “take America back.” It was to be their largest rally in decades, a protest against the planned removal of a statue of the Confederate General, Robert E. Lee, from a city park. They were met with hundreds of counter-protesters – religious leaders, Black Lives Matter activists, and anti-fascist groups – singing spirituals, chanting, praying, and carrying their own signs. Violent clashes between the groups ensued, and later a car sped down a pedestrian mall, plowing through crowds of people, many of them
counter-demonstrators. By the end of the day, one person had been killed and 35 others had been injured.

When we hate our brothers (and sisters), when we cannot speak peaceably with one another, the unresolved tensions between us can tear us apart. The American Civil War ended more than 150 years ago! And yet, here we are, in 2017, fighting in the streets over how the Civil War will be remembered, whether “Black Lives Matter” in the U.S. or really only “White Lives Matter,” and whether Klansmen and neo-Nazis will be allowed to intimidate and terrorize our communities.

Now it would be easy to point to events in Charlottesville and say it’s those white nationalists, those neo-Nazis and Klansmen that are the problem. It’s those hate groups that keep perpetuating racism. But then I am reminded of the words of Augustin of Hippo: “Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself.” Or as the apostle Paul put it: “All have sinned and fallen short.”

It’s easy to think of racism as something that exists completely outside of ourselves. I’ve come to realize that that’s a way of distancing myself from the problem and absolving myself of any responsibility for it. I have had to come to terms with the fact that growing up white in a racist society, I have benefited from racism and been shaped by racism, without my even being aware of it, just as a fish doesn’t know its in water.

That’s part of the problem. Most of us who are white in America are simply oblivious. We are able to live in a bubble, if we so choose, in which we are blind to the racism in our society and unaware of how we contribute to it and benefit from it. Those of us who are white are very good at avoiding the subject altogether. If the topic of race ever comes up, most of us run the other way. It makes us uncomfortable. We’d rather talk about anything else.

But if things are going to change for the better in our society, we need to look within ourselves, examine our own lives, and speak confessionally about our role and responsibility in perpetuating the deeply rooted systemic racism that continues to exist in our country. We must begin with confession before we can move to repentance. We need to be able to talk about race, openly and honestly. And we need to be able to listen to one another with open hearts and generous spirits.