

Fine People

From the Bible: 1 Peter 2: 9-10

Paul Alcorn
Bedford Presbyterian Church
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Like so many of my Sunday morning reflections, this morning's had its start in the news. Once again, I found myself in that challenging gap between what I understand to be the imperatives of the Bible and the events of the day. This time it was because of President Trump's comments that there were fine people who were a part of the white nationalist rally about a month ago in Charlottesville, Virginia. Let me say this. I am sure there were. I am sure *fine people* were there. I will get to that in a moment, but first, this.

For nearly all of my adult life, in some capacity, I have worked with children and youth. Mostly with middle school and high school students doing my best to help them think about God and faith and what it means to follow Jesus hoping they catch a glimmer of faith from me which will grow over time and eventually will guide and sustain their lives in a way similar to how my faith has grown and guided and sustained my life. I have tried to help them value their own faith tradition, Christianity, without denigrating or demeaning or devaluing other faith traditions which is different from what I learned growing up. I have encouraged them to take the Bible seriously, but not literally. And, I have challenged them to grapple with what I think is the most important religious question of our time which is the question: Who is my neighbor?

To be honest, I think I have had mixed success.

By and large, the young people who have grown up in the embrace of this congregation are thoughtful and compassionate adults and young adults who are engaged with the world in a way I was not when I was their age. I am often humbled by who they are and by what they do. Where I have not done such a good job is helping to connect them back to the Church. Back to a community of faith which will hold them and nurture them and challenge them. Back to a community which connects them to the Holy and to a place and a people where they hear language we don't often hear and which often stands counter to the world out there. Language which reminds us of values such as gratitude and generosity and compassion and justice. Many of these young adults are good people. Among the best I know. Maybe they are beginning to shape a community, a sense of church in a new and different way which I don't have the ability and vision to see. But, I don't know.

Here is what all that causes me to wrestle with.

Is being a good person good enough?

On one hand, I want as many good people around me as I can get. And, I want as many good people around my children and your children and our children as I can get. And, as I said, the ministry and witness of this congregation has nurtured hundreds and hundreds of good, caring,

kind, compassionate young adults.

But, left to our own devices, who or what defines what is good?

My feelings?

My conscience?

Societal norms?

What seems best to me in the moment I have to decide?

In being good...being a good person...what is it I aspire to?

What is the dream I work towards?

What is the corrective when fail or fall short?

Where do we find the markers to guide me when I am struggling and trying to find my way?

I grapple with these questions.

For my own life.

And as I do my best to nurture the faith of the children and youth with whom I work and interact.

And as I stand here before you on any given Sunday morning.

Now back to where I began.

I agree with President Trump.

There probably were *fine people* at the rally in Charlottesville.

That is...

If you define *fine* as people who get up each day and go to work and do their jobs.

If you define *fine* as people who say hello to their neighbors and help out when they can.

If you define *fine* as those who pay their taxes and who don't get arrested.

If you define *fine* as those who show up at the Friday night football game. And, maybe even go to church on Sundays.

But, let's be clear.

And, honest.

It was *fine people*, often the pillars in the community, who resisted - sometimes violently; sometimes silently - the civil rights movement in the 60's believing blacks were inferior and did not deserve the right to vote or to swim in the town pool or to serve on the town board or to drink from the same water fountain. It was *fine people* who were in church each Sunday who forced ministers like Shodie's father to leave a church because of his position on civil rights and his association with the local black congregation. And, it was the reaction of *fine people* which led to the resignation of Robert E. Lee IV, a young Episcopal priest and distant nephew of General Robert E. Lee, who resigned his position as rector after speaking out about racial justice and the removal of statues of his ancestor and namesake. It was *fine people*, people just doing their jobs, who followed Paul Briggs, the former Pastor at Antioch Baptist Church, through stores when he walked in. Why? Because he was a black man. It is *fine people* who resist Jews joining their clubs. Why? Because of they are Jewish and not Christian. It was *fine people* who refused a cake or a marriage license to a gay couple or who for far too long said, and sometimes still say, LGBTQ people have no place in the church. And, it was *fine people*, at least some of them were, who carried torches evoking images of KKK cross burnings and lynchings, who participated in the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville.

And, let's also be clear and honest about this.

Once you say you are Christian...

Once you say you follow in the way and in the spirit of Jesus...

Or, at least, lean in that direction.

You commit to something more than being nice and being good.

You commit to measuring the breadth and depth of your life against the imperatives of the Gospel and the witness of the Bible which, at its core, has something to do with compassion and justice and peace and inclusiveness. Which has something to do with a concern for the widow and the orphan and the silenced and the marginalized. A witness which elevates the needs the others and places it alongside your own needs and wants. A witness which builds bridges and not walls and affirms and recognizes the *made in God's image* dignity of every single human being. At least this is how I read the Bible and what I believe.

How did the author of 1 Peter put it?

Once you were not a people. Now you are God's people.

God's priesthood. God's peculiar people.

Look around.

Do you believe it?

You? Me? Us?

Just as you are and just as I am and just as we are?

Ordinary as we are. Extraordinary as we are.

Broken and pieced back together as we are.

God's people.

God's presence.

Our lives...who we are in this moment and in each day we have...reflecting that which we know and believe about God onto and into the lives of others and the complex and sometimes heartbreaking circumstances of the world as it is. If, like me, you do believe it or try your best to believe it, how awesome and unsettling and challenging and life-changing that affirmation is. To be God's presence with all of what that means - light, hope, compassion, generosity, dignity - amidst all the brokenness and need and hunger and hatred and searching which we see around us each and every day.

I am sure there were *fine people* in Charlottesville a month ago.

Just as there are good people who want to keep those *others* whoever they are in their place.

But if we believe in God's Kingdom come being good is not good enough. Is it?

At least, that is not who you and I are called to be.