

Over the past couple of weeks we have been reading from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. Today we are going to read part of the Scripture I read last week and continue further into chapter 4.

We have learned that Paul began the churches in Galatia but after leaving them some evangelists have come in behind him and undermined some of what he had taught the Galatians. The new Christians in Galatia came from a Gentile or non-Jewish background.

After Paul started these churches he left but then some Jewish Christian evangelists came to Galatia. These evangelists were teaching the Galatians that the people had to become Jewish and follow Jewish customs and laws before they could become Christian. Paul became very upset by this. Paul writes the Galatians to tell them that faith in Christ is about faith and not about being focused on following rules and customs.

Today we are going to learn that Paul has some type of physical handicap. We don't know what it is. But let us listen to what he has to say about it and how the Galatians treat him.

Read Galatians 3:27-28; 4:12-18

These past two weeks have seen some incredible contrasts of experiences in our country's narrative. As a nation we were brought together a week and a half ago to celebrate the life of boxing legend Muhammed Ali. You may know that Ali grew up as Cassius Clay and was raised in a Baptist Church in Louisville, KY.

After winning the gold medal in the 1968 Olympics for his country Clay returned home and went into a local restaurant for lunch. He was told, "We don't serve Negroes here." Clay responded back and said he doesn't eat Negroes either but that he just wanted 2 hot dogs." Clay was thrown out of the restaurant. Rejected by his hometown and rejected by Christians he turned to Islam where he changed his name to Muhammed Ali.

Ali spent his life trying to give witness to something different than the rejection which he encountered in his life. Ali left specific instructions on how he wanted his life celebrated after his death. And there onstage at the event to celebrate Ali's life was a Baptist preacher, a Jewish rabbi, a Buddhist monk, an Islamic Imam, and a Native American spiritual leader. Ali in his death wanted to give witness to how diverse people could come together and share their common humanity.

Friday marked the one year anniversary of Dylann Roof leaving Hopkins, SC, the community where I grew up in outside of Columbia, and traveling to Charleston where he entered a Bible study at the Emmanuel AME Church. Roof was welcomed into that study on Mark 4 by the 9 people who gathered that night. After sitting through the study Roof then pulled out a gun and shot then all dead.

Roof had hoped to start a race war. Instead the family members of that church responded by offering words of forgiveness and reconciliation over their feelings of pain and grief. Our governor responded to this violent act by leading the effort to remove the Confederate flag from the state house grounds. Instead of a race war people came together to celebrate our oneness as human beings.

Last Sunday when we gathered in worship I shared the news that there had been a shooting in Orlando and multiple people had died. We learned later that 49 people had been killed and over 50 injured in the worst terror attack in our nation's history. We have been learning this week that the target of the attack was a bar that was a central gathering place for people who are gay and lesbian. On that night the bar had a large Latino population present.

We have been hearing reports that the alleged killer was someone who has apparently been struggling with his own sexuality and violent behavior and turned to violent religious extremists and an assault weapon to vent his internal anger. An unstable person, religious extremism, and an assault weapon combined to create this bloody scene of death to at least 49 people and injuries to over 50 more.

So how do we respond? I am going to invite us to reflect on our first lesson which is a story of Jesus' encounter with an unstable person. We are told that Jesus informs his disciples that they are going to get in a boat and travel across the Sea of Galilee to the other side of the lake to the region called Gerasene.

When they arrive in Gerasene, a man approaches Jesus who has been possessed by demons. He is so violent that he has to be held down by chains. The demons beg for Jesus to leave them alone. Jesus negotiates a deal with them that they can leave the man and enter into pigs nearby. The possessed man and the pigs were all considered unclean by Jewish law. The demons accept this offer and leave the man and enter the pigs where they take off for the water and drown.

In the next scene, we find the man who had formerly been possessed by demons now sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. Do the people in the region all celebrate what Jesus has done? Far from it. They become terrified of Jesus and ask him to leave. Out of their fear of seeing healing of a man possessed by demons they tell Jesus they want him to go away.

Interesting response by Jesus at this point. The text says that because the people were so overcome by fear that Jesus leaves them. Great fear overcomes the people and Jesus leaves them. But the man healed from the demons does not ask Jesus to leave. Instead the man begs Jesus if he can stay with Jesus. But Jesus does not allow the man to stay with him. Jesus instead sends the man back to his family to declare what Jesus had done for him.

In our second lesson today we learn that Paul has some type of physical limitation. We don't know what it is. But we do know how the people treated Paul. The Galatians did not turn Paul away because of his physical handicap. They welcomed him as an angel of God in his words. The community looked beyond his physical limitations and welcomed him into the community.

So what is our response to all of these events that have occurred in the last week in our country? Some have responded by looking for information and opinions to reaffirm what they already think they believe. Rather than be voices of reconciliation many Americans become voices of more hatred and intolerance. That is one way to respond.

One way to respond is to seek out like-minded people with like-minded thoughts. We can then build higher walls of fear. We arm ourselves with whatever weapons we think we need to defend what we believe is ours to defend.

Others of us choose to remain silent in the face of intolerance and hatred around us. By remaining silent we give consent to whatever vitriol is voiced by our families and friends in our presence or on social media. We remain silent as certain groups are singled out as the enemy of whatever we think we believe.

Those are a couple of ways we can choose to respond to recent events in our country that repeat themselves way too often. There is, on average, a mass shooting with at least 4 people shot in the United States every 6 days.

But let me tell you about one community of faith and how they have responded to recent events. This is the story of an Orthodox Jewish congregation in Washington, DC that decided to respond to the tragedy in Orlando by going to a gay bar. Listen to their rabbi tell about what happened next.

“When our synagogue heard about the horrific tragedy that took place at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, it was at the same time that we were celebrating our festival of Shavuot, which celebrates God’s giving of the Torah. On Sunday I announced from the pulpit that as soon as the holiday ended at 9:17 p.m. Monday, we would travel from our synagogue in Northwest Washington to a gay bar as an act of solidarity.

I had not been to a bar in more than 20 years,” the rabbi recalled. “And I had never been to a gay bar. Someone in the congregation told me about a bar called the Fireplace, so I announced that as our destination. Afterward, I found out it was predominantly frequented by gay African Americans.

Approximately a dozen of us, wearing our kippot, or yarmulkes, went down as soon as the holiday ended. We did not know what to expect. As we gathered outside, we saw one large, drunk man talking loudly and wildly. I wondered whether we were in the right place. Then my mother, who was with me, went up to a man who was standing on the side of the building. She told him why we were there. He broke down in tears and told us his cousin was killed at Pulse. He embraced us and invited us into the Fireplace.

We didn’t know what to expect,” the rabbi shared. “But it turned out that we had so much in common. We met everyone in the bar. One of the patrons told me that his stepchildren were actually bar-mitzvahed in our congregation. Another one asked for my card so that his church could come and visit.

The bartender shut off all of the music in the room, and the crowd became silent as we offered words of prayer and healing. Then everyone in the bar put their hands around each other’s shoulders, and we sang soulful tunes. After that, one of our congregants bought a round of beer for the whole bar. Everyone in the bar embraced each other. It was powerful and moving and real and raw.”

The rabbi concludes his reflection by saying this, “I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an opportunity to learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other.”

So the questions for us today here at Allison Creek are these. What are we going to do to connect to people who feel as though they are in pain and on the outside? How are we going to help connect them to the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ?

Do we connect people to God's love in Jesus Christ by words of hate? Do we connect people to God's love in Jesus Christ by our silence in the face of words of hate? Do we connect people to God's love in Jesus Christ by using our financial resources to purchase bigger and stronger weapons?

Or do we connect people to God's love in Jesus Christ by reaching out and showing love and hospitality?

As you contemplate your response, I invite you to recall how Jesus treated the person overcome by demons and how the Galatians treated a handicapped Paul. AMEN.

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-Herzfeld, Rabbi Shmuel, "What Happened When An Orthodox Jewish Congregation Went to a Gay Bar to Mourn Orlando," Washington Post, 6/15/16, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/15/what-happened-when-an-orthodox-jewish-congregation-went-to-a-gay-bar-to-mourn-orlando/>

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