

After Charlottesville¹
Joel 2.23-29, John 3.1-21
August 13, 2017
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

I couldn't have been more than 8-years-old, riding along in our Buick station wagon with my mother and two younger brothers (perhaps ages 5 and 3 that day) when I heard my mother gasp. I remember exactly where we were in Mobile—Government Street near the Loop, heading home. She gasped and pulled over as a truck with an enormous Confederate flag came into view. "What's wrong?" I asked. She quickly composed herself and kept driving. "Nothing," she said in the way mothers do when they want to restore calm and prevent worry amongst the children. "I thought it was the Klan. But it was only one truck." It's my earliest memory of associating a particular flag and a particular group with the presence of trouble and danger. A decade later, I walked into the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute for the first time, and it was the first time I'd seen the white robe in person. There in the shadows, off in the corner, with recorded voices echoing racial taunts and threats overhead, a lone white robe of the KKK hangs inside a lucite case. The Institute, brilliantly and artfully arranged, twists and winds its way through the story of the Movement toward a bright and beautiful atrium overlooking the 16th St. Baptist Church where Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley were killed on a Sunday morning in 1963 by members of the KKK.

The thing is, as a white girl in Alabama growing up in a bubble of a world with remarkable resources and opportunities, I had these singular experiences for the first twenty years of my life that were almost always met with a complementing message, "And now that's over. Aren't we glad that's over? Now everyone is equal and racial equality is here." But in time, I came to realize that story wasn't true. Growing up, there were fewer than a dozen people of color in my private, college prep school. In fact, the only people of color I knew cleaned houses, cut lawns, or worked at the country club—the same country club where we all knew that our Jewish friends couldn't be members. The message persisted, however, and it still persists among so many in our country, "All of that is over. Aren't we glad that's over? Everyone is equal. Everything is fixed." We here in this room know that isn't true and are committing ourselves as a people to a life together of peace and justice work that continues to move us all toward equity and wholeness—we believe in the comprehensive flourishing of all people. And yet a

¹ Printed title "Reconnecting with Unconscious" from John Philip Newell's *The Rebirthing of God*. References to the chapter were cut short in light of the events in Charlottesville, VA, on 8/11-12/17.

drumbeat of “Too Much” has continued growing louder in our nation, particularly over the past year. “Too much equity. Too much support and assistance. Too much diversity. Too much other. You won’t replace us.”

There is great fear in our country today, and it’s not just around racial justice and human rights, but we’ll start there today because that is where we are in our nation’s story this morning. Actually, we were here three years ago, too. It was August 9, 2014, that Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri. Not the first innocent black man to die at the hands of power, and certainly not the first such death to go unpunished. But an awakening began in Ferguson that year, in our consciousness, in my own heart and mind and soul, and it is still waking up in us and around us, though we as a people (or maybe I should qualify: we as white people) may want to put it back to sleep. The work is not over. Not all are equal. Not everything is fixed. Fewer than four years together, and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve stood here on a Sunday morning after an indescribable tragedy rooted in white supremacy with a burning in my belly to respond in some way that is more than shouting into the ether.

I’ve spoken words some haven’t wanted to hear. I’ve rallied and cried out and lamented. I have felt powerless to effect change. In these awakening years, many of you have walked step for step with me as we’ve asked question about how our world really works. In Richard Rohr’s *The Divine Dance*, he talks about scripture that refers to “the world”—*be in the world but not of the world*. When we read these instructions, he tells us, know that “world” doesn’t mean this earthly realm vs. the heavenly realm. “The world” means “the system.” Rohr writes, “Culture is built on a movement toward empire, toward aggrandizement of the group, toward making itself number one—this creates the interior conflict that Scripture already describes as the conflict between the world and the Spirit. And please understand that in the New Testament, the oft-used word *world* doesn’t refer to creation. The best interpretation would be the ‘system.’ This system is the way we structure reality, and it’s almost always going to be diametrically opposed to the [holy] mystery.”²

And the system as Rohr describes, is slanted to benefit some and exploit others. We are asking: how do we un-slant the system? We’re working on it. We’re working on our stuff here. About three dozen of us read *The New Jim Crow* earlier this year, and we’ve begun waking up as a people to the roots of supremacy and the subtle and overt ways we are complicit in the systems of this world that benefit some at the expense of others.

² Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, p. 64

We're not just reading and learning, we're acting. You can't talk about race and injustice in this city, in particular, without talking about incarceration. We've stepped firmly into the world of criminal justice and the onion layers of questions we must ask about how the system keeps people stuck, keeps people locked up, and makes money off of black and brown bodies. Some of you are volunteering now to go into prisons and sit and cultivate relationships with those on the inside. Some of you are working on crafting public statements to abolish the death penalty. Some of you are now trained to go into courtrooms and be citizen witnesses for fairness.

We know that racism is just not about the criminal justice system, of course. We sent our Associate Pastor, Tim Lauve-Moon, to participate in Undoing Racism led by The People's Institute, and now several of us will attend the same 2 1/2 day Undoing Racism workshop in September focusing on understanding what racism is, where it comes from, how it functions, why it persists and how it can be undone.³ We will continue to participate in these trainings to address and un-do the racism built into the system all around us. We are doing our work. We are committed to our awakening together.

But again, I'm standing here on a Sunday after an indescribable tragedy rooted in white supremacy. And I feel like my words just barely fall past my lips. The Klan robe isn't locked behind a lucite cabinet in a dark room in Birmingham, it's boldly walking the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, and the campus of UVA. The images from Friday night of torch-wielding men, self-proclaimed white nationalists, weren't even hiding beneath robes and masks as they chanted, "You won't replace us." Tremendous fear pulsing and winding through our nation's streets, and unchecked fear becomes a dangerous motivator and weapon. We are working against a system with roots so twisted and deep that uncovering and digging up one doesn't begin to expose how destructive the old, gnarled beast is. These are the effects of sin that snares and entangles, tying us so desperately to cultural brokenness that we do not know where to begin disentangling ourselves.

On July 10, barely a month ago, I shared on Facebook a photograph of CBF pastor Michael Cheuk walking arm in arm with clergy and people of faith, leading a peaceful protest in response to another Klan rally in Charlottesville—that time just the Klan and in full regalia. I expressed my gratitude for his leadership and our need to organize, partner, collaborate, and resist. I've almost described that photograph in a couple of sermons and then let it go. Maybe it didn't fit just right on any particularly Sunday. Or maybe I naively dismissed it as a solved case. The Klan showed up, the clergy

³ <http://www.pisab.org>

responded, and life went back to normal. "All of that is over. Aren't we glad that's over? Everything is fixed."

What does it even mean to say "and life went back to normal." The Klan went home to organize, not repent. And I dissolved back into the details of my own life. Apparently, I need to be reminded yet again that these times are not normal. And so a similar image appeared yesterday as the daring and kind Michael Cheuk put on his robe and stole again along with so many beloveds I know from seminary, from my decade of life and work in Virginia, and from partnerships in the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. They gathered yesterday morning to pray, to sing, and to stand in resistance against the white supremacist activity around them. Pastor Traci Blackmon traveled to join them. Professor Cornell West traveled to join them. And preacher/teacher/writer Brian McLaren was there. Of the event he wrote, "I wish we could simply ignore the Unite the Right groups gathering in Charlottesville this weekend. But I do not believe they can be ignored. They must be confronted in love, not returning insult for insult or anger for anger, but seeking to overcome evil with good."

How can we possibly do that? What does confronting in love look like? How can we do any more than we already are? Theologian "Thomas Berry says the universe is so amazing in its interrelatedness that it must have been dreamt into being. He also says our situation today as an earth community is so desperate...that we must dream the way forward."⁴ In our dreaming, J.P. Newell writes, "Whether as individuals or collectively as nations and religious traditions, new beginnings will be born among us when we open to the well of what we do not yet know or what we have forgotten deep within."⁵

At the radical emerging of the church in Acts 2, Peter points to the words first spoken by the prophet Joel as the way forward: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." The way forward isn't linear and isn't easy to reason and schedule our way through. The way forward is radical and emerging, it is the stuff of inspiration and of dreams, intuition and Spirit movement. We must continue to embrace spiritual practice, as we have talked about in recent weeks, and our lives must be a perpetual awakening to the ways and work of God in the world.

In our Gospel lesson today, we have Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the cover of darkness with burning questions about Jesus' ministry. Jesus responds with bizarre

⁴ J.P. Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, "Reconnecting with the Unconscious," p. 89

⁵ J.P. Newell, p. 89

language about being born from above, born from water and Spirit. This is where we get the language of being “born again,” and it’s as weird in John’s gospel as it sounds when people talk about being “born again Christians” now. What does it mean? What is Jesus describing? The perpetual rebirthing Jesus describes is connected to being or becoming people of light. He says, “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

I think Jesus is describing a pendulum swing back-and-forth between new and old self; an unfolding process rather than a once-and-for-all formula. I was taught the formula, and it doesn’t work. There is no single line to be repeated or ritual to experience that once-and-for-all delivers us to the palm of God’s hand and removes us from the broken darkness we know in this world and in ourselves. This Way Jesus describes is an unfolding, an awakening, even a rebirthing that we must experience over and over again. A forgetting and remembering that is not just mine or yours to chase after but collectively ours together. We need new language, new insight, new imagination. We need a rebirthing. We need the stuff of Spirit-breathed visions and dreams if we are to make our way forward through the present realities facing our nation and global community. We need churches and synagogues and mosques and community gathering spaces so radically devoted to chasing the light together that there is no compatibility there for waving torches in darkness.

I have stared into the faces of those angry, shouting men and wondered how many of them walk with great comfort and ease into their houses of worship today. The space of compatibility and comfort still very much exists within the church in the United States. This is not new. In fact, Dr. King wrote to those nice, moderate, white pastors in the same year that the 16th St. Baptist Church was bombed. When they suggested he was overstepping, saying too much, sticking his nose where it didn’t belong, not being patient enough, not honoring the neutrality of the pulpit that they so cherished, when they questioned his persistence, he responded:

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the

goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

"More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."

"[T]he question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

"If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world."

"I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark

clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.”

It is my prayer that we give ourselves anew to this way of Spirit, of creative extremism, and of radical rebirthing. My brothers and sisters, may you be born from above again and again and again. May you give yourself to the slow and steady work of disentangling and digging up the roots of sin that bind us to darkness and old self. May you dream dreams and embody them. May you not grow weary in doing good. Amen.