

# “Discerning the Will of God”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 27, 2017  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20 and Romans 12:1-8

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

*Matthew 16:13-20*

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

*Romans 12:1-8*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your holy spirit. I pray that You would take the words and images that each of us carry within; the words that we offer in song and in prayer; the words that we've heard read from Your holy scripture; and the words that You laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. And may that word feed us this day. May we be reminded that we are Your people, each of us a part, a member of the body, gifted for Your purposes. So speak to us, comfort us, and challenge us this day. We pray in the name of Your son, who is our Lord now and forever. Amen.

Do not be conformed to the world, or to the news of the world, or to the ways of the world, but allow yourself and your world view to be transformed by the renewing of your minds and your understanding. Allow yourself to realize that the world is trying to shape you and manipulate you based on fear, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ is trying to encourage you in love. Paul is trying to remind us and the Romans that there are kind of two basic ways to interact with the world: fear or love. Now, I don't know about you, but every time I see something about a Facebook post or a tweet or a news headline about 36 inches or more of rain, about a hurricane is going to sit for days, about misunderstandings in the political realm, about what's going to happen or not happen based on someone's whim--every time I hear any of those things, all I think about is [gasp] and I get afraid. That's being conformed to the world. And I think what Paul is inviting us to do is to get below that and to realize that our trust and our life and our purpose is all centered in the love of God offered to each of us through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and that we, as believers, have a choice. Do we traffic in fear or do we traffic in love? He says as much so that you may discern what is the desire of God, what is good and acceptable and pleasing and perfect and mature. This is what Paul is trying to get us to do. Do the good thing. If you could sum up all of what he's saying in just four words. Do the good thing. That's it. Do the good thing. Whatever situation you find yourself in, do the good thing. It's simple, right?

So a week ago, Wednesday, early in the morning, I got dropped off at the airport to put myself inside of a airline seat that was only half big enough, to fly to Charlottesville, Virginia, on behalf of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, to go meet with what I was told was going to be five or six pastors from the local presbytery in Charlottesville and then maybe with some others. Well, when we got to the church where the meeting was going to happen, there were already 34 people gathered there, and as we sat down to begin people were still coming in and they were adding chairs to make the circle bigger. I wasn't quite sure what we were going to do with so many people, but the moderator of the meeting, the general presbyter of that area, was committed that people would simply tell their stories. And so when I asked him if his plan changed with the number of attendants he said, "No. We're still going to listen to stories." And I said, "Okay. I'm kind of curious how this is going to go." He first invited those that were actually at the protest to share their story. There were four or five people that were there who had been there out in Charlottesville on the streets on either Friday night or on Saturday. And they shared stories that were unbelievable to me. I watched as a woman sitting next to me shared her story and she was still visibly shaking with energy. She talked about standing next to a colleague of hers from the Methodist church, in a line that they had formed at the steps to the only Synagogue in town, on Saturday. As they stood there, armed members of the KKK came up to that line and wanted to get through and go up the steps of the Synagogue. They had AR-15 assault rifles with them and were decked out in garb except for the hoods. She was trying to capture the energy of that moment as she's shaking and telling the story, and what she said was she stood there and watched her colleague friend put out her hand, grab the rifle, and turn the business end of it down towards the ground and say to the clansperson in front of her, "If you're looking to start a war, don't do it in my home town. You need to leave."

One after the other, they shared similar stories of what it's like when evil comes to your community and tries to destroy it. They talked about how they didn't really see people or brothers or sisters or others. That it really was evil that they saw, because they were so terrified about what was going to happen to them or to their neighbors. And, again, most of them were still quivering from the energy. And then there was the other group, the 40 or so who hadn't been directly involved. They also had a lot of energy, but their energy wasn't quivering because of the trauma of seeing evil so close. Their energy was because they were angry that this had happened and they knew it was time to stand up and do something. One after the other started to share about how we need to stand in the pulpit and

denounce, without any question, our ancestry that is involved with the KKK or Neo-Nazis or All Rider or White Supremacy. We need to stand up and say, "No." And others talked about how white southern gentlemen who are not part of those groups need to stand up and need to denounce them and claim that they are not like that. And on and on it went, and all this energy, and, "We should do this, and we should do that, and we should write a prayer, and we should--" and on and on. It just kept building and building and building. And finally it's 5 o'clock and everyone's like, "Oh." And the moderators says, "Oh, you know what? In honor of our time, I just need to let you know that we're done. But before we go we have these experts here and they're going to share with us." At the end of a two and a half hour meeting where there's all this kind of energy about either terror or this indignant rage to do something, my partner Beth and I had to speak.

Thankfully, she was in charge and she spoke the church line about how the church is with them and the denomination is with them, people are paying attention and praying, and on and on. And then I got to say ultimately, or almost the last word. And as I sat and thought about what to share, the only thing that came to me was the simple response of, "I've tasted those tears that roll down your face when evil comes to your community. I know what that's like." And then I encouraged, or maybe admonished, each of them to be gentle with themselves in the weeks ahead and to be careful what they commit their energy to, because so many of them were so wound up I was afraid that they would react to something rather than to respond to it thoughtfully. That was Wednesday and, as some of the times these things go, we ended up with literally nothing to do on Thursday. And so being in downtown Charlottesville, I thought, "Well, I'm just going to take a walk and I'm going to try to find Emancipation Park where all the protesting took place. Little did I know that I had to walk one block down a pedestrian street and then one block over, and there it was. It was literally a block from the hotel. It was quiet. There was a statue of Robert E. Lee on a horse in the middle of it. There are few people taking pictures. And right to the base of the statue where it said Robert E. Lee, someone had stuck an enormous sign that they had colored with markers, that said Heather Heyer Park. And it was just laying there, and people, again, were just milling around taking pictures.

After spending, I don't know, a few minutes at the park, I went back to the main street in Charlottesville, which is a pedestrian road. Cars can only come across it this way, but you can walk this way with no traffic. There's restaurants and bars and clothing stores, a pawn shop, other kind of cute things, and a nice downtown area. I walked about two blocks further from the hotel when all of a sudden, without even thinking, I had this awareness, "I've seen that." And what I saw was at the end of a street, a metal barricade for a crowd, and at the foot of the barricade there was a mountain of flowers spread all the way across the street. And then I realized that's where she died. On the street, there were probably five or six people that were on their hands and knees with giant chalk sticks and they were writing messages of hope and peace, and denouncing hate, and promoting love, and doing all the kinds of things you would want people to do. It was a slow walk down the street reading all of the different messages, and I stood for I don't know how long at the flowers before turning and slow walking back up reading what was on the other side of the street. But when I got to the top of the street and kind of caught my breath, I looked [inaudible] corner and there on the other side of the intersection was a big wooden cross with the message Life or Death across the center part. And there was a man standing underneath that cross with a microphone and a little speaker box, and a friend that was recording him on video, and he was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone that was walking by. "If you are going to die tonight, are you going to heaven or hell? Are you going to live or die? was what he was doing one after the other. And I stood there and watched people walk down the street and then come all the way around him to get back to the-- they wanted nothing to do with him. This little voice inside of

me said, "David, you're a pastor, a minister, a servant of the gospel. You need to go tell this guy to shut up [laughter]." And then I thought, "You know? It won't make any difference."

In anticipation of preaching today, I went online, because I was sure that I could find a video of this gentleman. His friend had been recording everything with a little camera kind of thing, so I just googled around and I found him. Let me tell you, I am really glad that I did not go confront this man because what I did not know is that he had a body camera right here and he had posted almost every interaction he had had with other people when he was in Charlottesville. One of them was entitled, "She's more interested in her ice cream than Jesus," because a woman came up holding an ice cream and the first thing out of her mouth was, "You don't belong here." And then for five or ten minutes, he tries to convince her how he's just preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The video that really caught my attention, though, was of a young man who was a member of the First United Methodist Church in Charlottesville. He had been a lifelong Christian, and when he walked up and invited the man to realize that what he was doing was not being loving or pastoral or honoring the gospel of Jesus Christ, the man who had the cross and the video kept asking him if he had accepted Jesus as his savior, and that his sins were not forgiven unless he did so, and that he was arrogant and he was unfaithful and-- it was just horrific.

So that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and pleasing and perfect and mature. I sat in a circle and listened to stories that made me understand things a little bit differently in Charlottesville. I watched energy of terror and anger fill fellow colleagues and sort of stir them to some sense of needing to do something. And then standing on the street-- standing on the street, I realized that, in its own way, this man with the cross was acting not in a loving, Christian way, but was instead inflicting terror of a different sort. Time and again, people of Charlottesville went up to this man and asked him to leave, and he refused to go. As I've sat with the invitation of discerning what is the will and desire of God this week, I've realized that sometimes, or maybe all the time, what matters most is that we live our lives with grace, that we allow the goodness of Jesus Christ to flow through us and do what is compassionate and right in every situation. And I've come to realize that standing on the corner of someone else's heartache, and yelling something about Jesus Christ, is not the gospel. What I love about us as a community of faith is that we understand that. We understand that what matters most is that we are saved by grace, and that we live by grace, and that we share that grace, and that our lives together are grounded in love - the love of Jesus Christ for us and for all people. And I'm thankful that this day we get to gather around the table and remember, all of us, that we are loved. Amen.