

**TOXIC WASTE**  
**Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28; August 20, 2017**  
**Union Congregational Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Robin Raudabaugh**

“If you aren’t outraged, you aren’t paying attention.” These were some of the last words written by Heather Heyer, the 32 year old woman killed when a car rammed into counter-protesters in the recent Charlottesville white supremacist rally.

For many years, we pastors of the liberal, progressive Christian churches have been cautioned and in fact, been told outright we cannot address political issues from the pulpit. And we have listened and followed that directive. Until now. Over the past year, as the language we hear every minute of the day and night all around us from the Whitehouse outward has devolved into hate-filled, violent, mean-spirited and bullying at best – the national leaders and many, many local pastors are speaking out. Not only the outspoken United Church of Christ, but many other mainline denomination’s leaders - are speaking out. We can no longer –we people of faith – (if we ever really could) – remain silent. We cannot continue to speak vague, ambiguous, non-confrontational words with little challenge from our pulpits - and in doing so - give little to no direction and very little real comfort.

If you aren’t outraged – you aren’t paying attention. When a group carrying flaming torches, marches up to the door of a church of people gathered in prayers of love and peace, that is not free speech. That is an act of terrorism. What matters now is resistance. The time for gentle inactive prayers is over. The time is now to be vigilant and vocal and present. These are the words of Charlottesville’s mayor Michael Signer, who continued, saying, “There is nothing wrong with us - that what is right with us can’t address.”

However - what is right with us – must address what is wrong with us. We church folk – we Christian believers - can no longer – we never really could – we just did – and trusted someone else to do what we should all have been doing all along – we can no longer remain silent and not present – including in our churches and including from the pulpit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man of extraordinary courage, imprisoned and finally executed during the German holocaust for his refusal to let the church become an instrument of Hitler’s policies wrote from prison, words of hope and courage and comfort. He wrote: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

The events of Charlottesville have shaken us to the core. We despair that today's Nazi's and white supremacists feel emboldened to spew hateful venom into the public square with impunity while wearing helmets, wielding shields, and brandishing weapons. We are confounded by the self-proclaimed anti-fascists who thrive on violence. The moral fabric of our nation is seriously frayed.

I know that many of you are desperate to be a part of the solution. You want to confront the evil, face it down, expose it for what it is. I love your fierce anger to make a difference, to take a stand for God. [Old South Church FB post.] That despair and hope is why we organized and joined together with others from our wider community in a candlelight vigil last Sunday evening following the horrific events in Charlottesville. We spoke and listened to one another and sang our hope for a world of peace with justice.

Many around our country are joining together and marching publicly in protest and resistance to the overt hatred and invective being spewed everywhere we turn. All of these actions are a good start.

And some of you are uncomfortable – very uncomfortable with all that is going on. You want to shut your doors, turn off the televisions, get off Facebook, take a long vacation to Canada. This is not the world you thought it was – this United States is not the country you thought it was.

Well, hear this, my friends. This is the country and the world, that many, many, many of our neighbors and friends and strangers have always known – this world of overt hatred and violence and intolerance. This is the world they step into every single day, every single moment of every single day. But for most of you – it has been really easy – or at least fairly easy – to not notice it. You haven't had to notice it. You haven't had hating intolerant people burning insignia into your front lawn or smearing it across your front door. You haven't had to worry and wonder every time your child leaves your home that will be safe. You haven't had to worry every time you see a police car that your safety was on the line – even though you know you haven't done anything wrong. You haven't had to tell your children or talk among yourselves about how you should dress – the kind of clothes you should or shouldn't wear, what to say or not to say, the angle to hold your head, where to go or not go...every single time you leave the privacy of your home...

You haven't noticed that this is the world we live in because for the most part you haven't seen or experienced this for yourselves. You haven't had to because you are white – you are male – you are straight – you live in the USA – and you are NOT a person of color – you are not gay/lesbian/transgender/bisexual – you are not a woman – you are not a person with disabilities - and you simply haven't had to notice that life isn't the same for everyone.

I want you to understand that staying out of politics or being sick of politics is privilege in action. Your privilege – the fact that you even have the choice to say this and act on it – allows you to live a non-political existence. Your wealth, your race, your abilities or gender allows you to live a life in which you likely will not be a target of bigotry, attacks, deportation, or genocide. You may not want to get political or fight because your life and safety is not at stake.

And - you want church to be nice and safe and comfortable. You want to find a place of rest and peace – and the only way you can have that is to ignore the very ones that church – that Jesus - addresses. The only way you can have that is to ignore the ones who are literally fighting for their very lives and safety. Your privilege allows you to not see it.

We are not all the same – and only if you are one of the privileged can you pretend that we are. We do not all have the same reality – the same sense of safety – the same sense of future. Some of these statements I just made may fit you – and some of them may not. You can figure out where you fit in the white privilege schema.

The events at Charlottesville are so horrifying because more than any previous recent events – including the events of 9-11 – bring the reality of hate and violence right into our homes and our lives. In large part because of social media - it is closer and more real than it's been for most of us for a long time. In a recent conversation with a member of this congregation, I expressed some of this awareness with the response “Oh but surely we don't have to worry about this sort of violence in Elk River!”

We already have some of this sort of violence in Elk River. We already have people in this town who support excluding and targeting Muslims and Jews, immigrants and refugees. We already have people in this town who smashed the Blessed Ramadan yard signs placed on the lawn of this church proclaiming our support of our Muslim neighbors and friends. We already have people in this town who destroyed our yard signs proclaiming that all are welcome here – at this church. We already have power pickup trucks with waving American flags blasting past our church and around town visually proclaiming something very different from the patriotism I believe I grew up with.

The time for speaking up is now. It's true that that may mean different things for different people, but if you claim yourself to be anywhere on this path with Jesus the Christ moving toward the God of all of Creation – then you must – we must – be willing to step out of our comfort and express our outrage. We must be willing to speak up and speak out – to not “just try to all get along.” Just getting along – avoiding certain topics – talking about colorblindness – talking about all lives matter - shoving disagreement under the rug - is not enough.

This is what led to the horrific events of the Holocaust in Germany – it is what led to genocide in so many places in our world. We people of privilege simply cannot believe what we hear and see – it's inconceivable - and so we turn our backs and our hearts away – until the horror and the violence is too big and too close to home to ignore any more.

Our scripture text for today leads us directly into this kind of toxic waste dump. A woman – 1 check against, a Caananite, a second check against – came to Jesus because she had heard so much about how he was turning the unjust world she knew upside down with goodness and healing power. All she wanted was to have her daughter healed. You'd think this would have been a no brainer for Jesus – a dab of spit, a gentle outstretched hand, a word ..... But that isn't how it went.

Once again those disciples – those closest followers of this Jesus – followers of this son of God – Jesus /God incarnate – those disciples tried to shoo her away. They don't want to see or hear her. And when she doesn't leave – but persists – and persists – Jesus says, "I was only sent to take care of my own – only Israel. It isn't fair to take what belongs to my people and throw it to the dogs." And yet this woman – this Caananite – the one Jesus, (our Jesus) called a dog (a derogatory name regularly used by fellow Jews to denigrate Gentile women - persisted – and replied "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the tables of the privileged." Jesus is caught with his compassion down - and forced to confront his own prejudice. I don't think there is any other way you can read this scripture today – no matter how you try to whitewash it. And finally – in the face of her persistence - Jesus sees this woman – really sees and hears her for herself – and recognizes that his ministry and hospitality must be far broader than the house of Israel – but must be for everyone – for all those outside as well as inside the house of Israel.

This woman. This outsider. This other. Persisted and spoke truth to power. This woman was outraged and demanded that Jesus step out of his power – and speak and stand up for all the powerless!

Her courage in the face of Jesus' indifference is amazing. And it is absolutely central for Jesus' ministry. Jesus has traveled into a toxic waste dump.

A place many churches and good Christians have pointed fingers at as unclean – dangerous. Places to stay out of because good Christians might become tainted or polluted?

Matthew tells this story to help us imagine and ask questions that in our complacency we've forgotten to ask. What would it mean – what will it mean – for our church – this church – to follow Jesus into the 'toxic waste' areas of our world. What would – what will it mean for us to follow directly in the footsteps of our United Church of Christ executive minister for Justice and Witness, the Rev.

Traci Blackmon as she speaks truth to power naming and claiming the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and putting her voice and herself in places of danger and risk.

What does this mean for us?

It means we will not let ourselves lose hope or be discouraged by the overt racism and the persistence of white supremacy that showed its most horrible face in Charlottesville last week. In the words of our UCC National President John Dorhauer “We have dealt with such racism before and we will deal with it again. And surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses we will put our bodies on the streets and lift our voices to the heavens. And we will signal that racism will not succeed as long as we have something to say about it.”

### **References**

There are so many sources of writings, FB posts which often led to other readings, videos and news clips, as well as preaching resources which have informed my thinking and the writing of this sermon. Below are some of the people and resources that most impacted my preparation.

<i>Heather Heyer</i>	<i>32 year old woman killed in Charlottesville white Supremacist rally. Quote from her mother on a Facebook post</i>
<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer</i>	<i>Writings from Prison and other writings and quotes.</i>
<i>Old South Church, UCC</i>	<i>A letter from the ministers. Facebook post.</i>
<i>Michael Signer</i>	<i>Mayor of Charlottesville. Quote on Facebook post from news clip.</i>
<i>Kristen Tea</i>	<i>(motherwiselife.org) From a Facebook post</i>
<i>Traci Blackmon</i>	<i>United Church of Christ executive minister for Justice and Witness. FB posts and news clips.</i>
<i>John Dorhauer</i>	<i>United Church of Christ General Minister and President. Letter to all United Church of Christ churches and ministers. Facebook posts.</i>
<i>Feasting on the Word</i>	<i>Year A volume 3, Proper 15, Ivan Russell-Jones, Gary W. Charles.</i>