

## Tougher Than You Think

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“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” – 1 Corinthians 13:13

A group of us from MLC attended a program last Tuesday at the Jewish Community Center on safety and security in houses of worship. It's a sad reality of the world that we live in that some people have decided to add churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques to their targets for violence. The memories of the mass shootings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, and Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, are still fresh. Reaching farther back are the killings of six people in a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and a mother of two in the parking lot of the Burnette Chapel Church of Christ near Nashville. Reaching even farther back in our national memory are the numerous African-American churches in the south that were bombed in the 1950s and 60s by whites opposed to racial integration, the most harrowing of which was the killing of four little girls who were putting on their choir robes when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was dynamited just about this time of day on the morning of September 15, 1963.

So when we gathered on Tuesday evening, the topic may have seemed fresh to some of us, but the problem is not new. Some of us – specifically our African-American and Jewish siblings – have lived with this reality for a very long time; white privilege has shielded others of us from it. The program was an acknowledgment that as much as we'd like to, even we who are privileged can't escape the painful realities of the world when we assemble for worship.

For me, Tuesday wasn't the first such program I've attended – our association sponsored a workshop entitled Church Safety 101 at its meeting in Hudson last November – and it won't be the last. In a little over a month, I'll be helping to host a Healthy Practices for Ministry event for the clergy in our association on how to make our churches safer, and here at Faith, we'll be devoting a Saturday morning, probably in March, to that same topic for our greeters, our ushers, and our liturgists. If you are a member of one of those groups, please keep an eye out for the announcement of that workshop and please plan to attend, because it's important.

As a pastor, I always find these conversations depressing, not because I'm indifferent to the need to try to keep people safe, but rather because it depresses me to dwell on how we respond to anthropogenic evil. Hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires – they happen and they're not good and we prepare as best we can for them. But the evil of someone who deliberately sets out to harm others is of a different sort of evil altogether. And how we respond to that evil will shape our interactions with others, for better and for worse, and help create what we consider normal.

The F. B. I. was there on Tuesday night. The Cuyahoga County prosecutor's office was there. The Beachwood police department was there. The speakers took turns at the microphone to speak of emergency preparedness, being aware at all times, and exit plans. There was talk of locked doors, social media, and surveillance cameras. And I was expecting to hear all of that.

What I wasn't expecting to hear, however, was talk of love, and yet F.B.I. special agent Brian Smith did just that, twice. Twice in his opening remarks he mentioned love in a room full of people who have spent their careers immersed in the worst that we do to each other, and who had come to help us equip our communities of faith to face the reality of evil. I wasn't expecting that.

I wasn't expecting to hear talk of love, and, not surprisingly, it didn't come up the rest of the evening. Love as we commonly understand it is too squishy, too soft, too flimsy a thing to manage or even survive what happens when we allow military-grade weapons to fall into the hands of the mentally unstable and those possessed by the demons of racism and antisemitism and xenophobia and homophobia. Love is for the Hallmark Channel and Valentine's Day and family and home and our communities of faith. The ethic of love has no place in the so-called real world, we're told, except as oases of good-will with words like church and synagogue and temple in their names.

That's the narrative we've been told, but that's not the narrative we tell here. The old, old story we tell here – the story far older than semi-automatic weapons and hateful rants on social media and rallies for white supremacy – that story is about Jesus and his love. The people gathered this morning in churches to tell that story – and, by the re-telling, try to live that story – they/we far, far, far outnumber even the largest gatherings of hate mongers. The ethic of love has motivated far more people in far more places for a much longer time than any hateful ideology or rhetoric or program. Love survives long after hate has shot itself, bombed itself, or burned itself out of existence.

I don't believe that, I know it. And so did the apostle Paul, and thus his famous words to the church at Corinth, which I have taken as my text for this morning: “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

How did Paul know that love was the greatest? How do we know it? Because the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, is a going concern. Its doors are open to members, to guests, and to pilgrims who come to remember. The church is still in the business of proclaiming and living God's love. The horrendous evil wreaked upon it fifty-six years ago didn't destroy it, didn't kill it, didn't force it to change its message of hope and peace, rooted in love. The fear of more violence didn't get that church to turn itself into something other than what it had been, still is, and always will be. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church embodies faith, it embodies hope, and above all else, it embodies love, the greatest. That's how we know that genuine love is the greatest. Love has allowed that church to survive a horrendous ordeal. Why? Because love is tougher than you think.

The members of the Sikh temple in Oak Creek forgave the killer of their loved ones the very day Wade Michael Page opened fire on them and then took his own life. They wept, they suffered, they buried their dead, and they sought ways to heal their shattered community. And they remain a Sikh temple today, proclaiming and living a faith devoted to the unity of God, the equality of all human beings, selfless service in the causes of justice and peace, and honest conduct as a believing Sikh. The lovers of God in that Sikh temple bear their wounds, but they're carrying on. Love is tougher than you think.

And the folks at Emmanuel A. M. E. Church in Charleston – they, too, are living witnesses to the gospel of peace and the ethic of love. One of the survivors of the shooting at that prayer meeting said that she can't close her eyes and bow her head anymore when she prays because that's what she did just before a young white racist who hoped to ignite a race war opened fire. She's wounded, and she'll always bear the scars, but she's still going to church, still living out her Christian faith, still bearing witness to the power of love over hate. Her life and her faith are rooted and grounded in love, and love is tougher than you think.

Friends, one of the worst things we Christians have done to our faith is to sentimentalize love. We've turned it into an emotion rather than an act of will. We've individualized it and made it a piece of our subjective experience: if I don't like something, I certainly can't love it.

But that's not what Christian love is. First John tells us that God is love, and if we believe that to be true, then that makes love an objective reality that depends neither on the lovability of the object nor the emotional maturity of the subject. Christian love is not how we feel or how we imagine Jesus would feel; Christian love is what we do in obedience to the will of God.

Christian love is not blind. Christian love knows full well how brutal the world can be and yet says no to any way of life that perpetuates that brutality. Christian love, again in Paul's words, "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (13:7-8). That's what the cross represents and that's why we keep it at the front of our churches and at the center of our faith. The cross does not represent how Jesus felt about God, about himself, or about the Romans. The cross doesn't represent what Jesus wanted. The cross represents God's self-sacrificial love for the world, and Jesus's self-sacrificial love for God and God's world in action.

"Love in action," the great Catholic social activist Dorothy Day said, "is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared to love in dreams." The cross is a harsh and dreadful thing, and Dorothy Day understood what the cross actually means for people who call themselves Christians.

As I said earlier, in a few weeks, we'll be devoting a Saturday morning here at Faith to training our greeters, ushers, and liturgists in how to help keep our church safe and secure as well as welcoming. That training has been forced upon us by the reality of a sinful world. The things we'll have to talk about won't be nice, but they are important, so all of you who participate in one or more of those groups should do your best to attend. Among other things, you'll learn how to make the building more secure, how to help people leave the building in an emergency, and what to do if something looks not quite right. Those are the sorts of things you'll learn.

What you will not learn is how to return evil for evil. What you will not learn is how to do unto them before they do unto us. What you will not learn is why we need to adopt the ways of those who would do us harm. Those things you will not learn, because this is a church, a Christian church, dedicated to Jesus the Christ, the Prince of Peace, Love made flesh. We will not allow fear to turn us into something we're not. Instead, we will use the creative power of love, which casts out fear, to keep us centered, grounded, and prepared. We'll trust love to do that because we know – with the help of Baptists, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, Methodists, and so many others who bear the imprints of nails in their hands and feet – that love is tougher than you think.