"Antidotes to Hate"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Last weekend, I was offline while attending a storytelling workshop. On my way home, I stopped by a dear friend's house. Her eyes kept darting to her phone and I asked what was up. "Oh my," she sighed with a none too subtle air of disgust . . . and then proceeded to tell me about Charlottesville.

Over the following days, I read through the news, the social media posts, and the responses. As with any major event, there was a lot of information to digest and sort through. Then, on Wednesday, "Hymn" by Sherman Alexie appeared online—his own response to the events of Charlottesville and of the relationship of President Trump's rhetoric to them.

As I wade into waters muddied with a mix of morality and politics, I restate my sense of call as a minister. It is not my role to tell you who to vote for, but it is my role to name and explore the moral issues at stake in the beliefs, actions, and statements of people and politicians as I understand them. Morality is part of the shape of religious life—especially for a religion like ours that claims the importance of "deeds not creeds." Religion is not simply an individual, private affair; religion speaks to how we show up in our shared life, our public life, our political life.

You likely know about—or even directly experienced—the rather large march in Boston yesterday. Tens of thousands poured into the streets to counter-protest a self-described "Free Speech Rally." Whatever the original intentions of the organizers for this event, it quickly became clear that the counter-protest was about Charlottesville and the resurgence of public bigotry and hate. The counter-protest was a big NO to a hate that would exclude so many because of the color of their skin, because of the religion they followed, or because of who they loved. The counter-protest was a clear NO to hate, to violence, and to a belief system that would subcategorize people into lives of greater or lesser worth.

This massive demonstration was an important counter to the news and images of astounding hate in Charlottesville. I mean, how deep does hate have to be to motivate a man to drive a car into a crowd of people, to take the life of one, and to injure so many others. Faced with such hate . . . what is our response?

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I unexpectedly found some answers on Tuesday afternoon. In support of a family friend, I attended a celebratory gathering in Mattapan that included the announcement of massive new state-wide funds for affordable housing. The Boston Mayor was there, as was the Governor, but the speaker who impressed me most was state Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, the senator for the Mattapan area. As she took her turn at the lectern, Diaz quickly tossed her prepared script and instead spoke from her heart. Recounting her words, the *Dorchester Reporter* wrote:

> *For Sen. Chang-Diaz, the juxtaposition of the racial violence in Charlottesville and the announcement of funding to house the Bay State's vulnerable populations struck a chord. She said that over the last few days, she has had several phrases on her mind, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "hate cannot drive out hate" as well as the general idea of prayer. "When you pray, you have to move your feet," she said, adding that the development of affordable housing across Massachusetts is an important step. "I think this is what love incarnate looks like," she said. "This is the antidote to what we saw in Charlottesville this weekend."*

More hate is not the antidote to hate. Love is the antidote to hate. Justice is the antidote to hate. Hope in actions that make the world a bit better is the antidote to hate.

Yet, hate can be so seductive. Hate can take root in small resentments until it grows into a powerful emotion. Or, hate can be born in an instant, emerging from a moment of insult or loss, violence or pain. And I'm not just talking now about politics and white supremacy. With its psychic power and emotional intensity, hate can show up in all kinds of places: a neighbor whose dog is forever damaging your yard; a friend who failed to show up when you needed them; a boss whose expectations seem to only set you up for failure.

What gives birth to hate? I suspect that's an area of significant inquiry within professional psychiatric circles. I can't speak to that literature, but I can say that in my own life I have both been the object of hate and I have hated. I have felt the hunger of hatred within that circles the meal of criticism and loathing. And I have felt the insatiable and often unreasonable spotlight of hatred affix on me in ways I did not know how to escape. Have you also felt what it's like to hate, to be hated?

Hate can feel like a disease that sickens the heart, the capacity for affection, and the processes of clear, balanced thought. Since tomorrow is the big solar eclipse, I'll use an eclipse metaphor.

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Hate is a darkness that can grow to eclipse our capacity for light, for love, for nurturing others with warmth. What then is the anti-dote to such a darkness?

The antidote is more love. A love that expands beyond our kin, beyond those that look like us, and actively reaches out and acts out. Sherman Alexie asks us:

Will you be
Eyes for the blind? Will you become the feet

For the wounded? Will you protect the poor?
Will you welcome the lost to your shore?

Will you battle the blood-thieves
And rescue the powerless from their teeth?

Who will you be? Who will I become
As we gather in this terrible kingdom?

Such questions point to a love in action. The antidote to hate is not more hate. It is love for strangers, for the vulnerable, for the suffering.

At the memorial service of Heather Heyer, the woman killed in Charlottesville, her mother challenged the crowd: "I want you to pay attention, find what's wrong ... and say to yourself, what can I do to make a difference? . . . And that's how you're going to make my child's death worthwhile." … "I'd rather have my child, but by golly, if I've got to give her up, we're going to make it count."

We cannot bring back the life of Heather Heyer or of all the unarmed black lives killed by police or the lives and limbs lost at the Boston Marathon bombing or the lives lost on 9/11. Hate and bigotry too often kill. So what can we do?

Alexie writes,

I will resist hate. I will resist.
I will stand and sing my love. I will use my fist

To drum and drum my love. I will write and read poems
That offer the warmth and shelter of any good home.

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I will sing for people who might not sing for me.
I will sing for people who are not my family.

I will sing honor songs for the unfamiliar and new.
I will visit a different church and pray in a different pew.
….
I am one more citizen marching against hatred.
Alone, we are defenseless. Collected, we are sacred.

Yesterday the streets of Boston were made sacred by the masses of people who showed up to pray with their feet. The March began with a lot of anxiety and fear. It was uncertain whether violent clashes would erupt as they had in Charlottesville. Some cautioned against going to the Common. Some said to stay home. My mom texted me she was supporting me…but to be careful and not to take any risks. It turns out that a lot of people received similar "mom texts". Despite the uncertainty and the awareness of risk, tens of thousands showed up. Our collectivity our best shield.

After a long march across Boston towards the Common, a boisterous band of tubas and trombones, drums and trumpets suddenly appeared beside us and began to play. The beat of the music mixed effortlessly with our chants of "Black Lives Matter" and "the people united will never be divided." Word began to spread that the "Free Speech" rally was very small and was over early. Our moods lifted further as we walked the last couple of blocks. And then there on the street between the Common and the Public Garden, the band stopped marching and simply began to play. Someone began tossing a beach ball through the crowd as we danced to the music. We were young and old, skin and hair of many hues, we were grungy with profanity laced signs and we were straight-laced clergy like me. And we were together. A sacred gathering saying NO to hate that divides and subcategorizes.

What is the antidote to hate? Love. Love in action marching against hate, caring for the stranger, trying to make a positive difference in the lives of those you do not even know.

I will close with the words that Alexie uses to close his Hymn.

We will march by the millions. We will tremble and grieve.
We will praise and weep and laugh. We will believe.

We will be courageous with our love. We will risk danger
As we sing and sing and sing to welcome strangers.

So may it be. Amen.

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