

(23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Hate Crimes)
1 Kings 3

I woke up this morning to two different headlines. One read: "All Three Had One Thing In Common - Hate!"

The other: "A Week of American Hate: Bombs mailed, Black people slaughtered, Jews Executed!"

On Friday, in Louisville, Kentucky, where I went to seminary, a white man, armed with a gun and heart filled with hate, tried to enter a black church to shoot worshippers of the God of Love. Finding the doors locked, he went to a grocery store, and shot and killed two black women. One of the women, a grandmother, was shopping with her granddaughter for poster board for a school project. The man did not shoot a white person he encountered in that parking lot, because as he said "White people don't shoot white people."

Over this past week, another White Supremacist, sent pipe bombs in the mail, targeting people he hated because they dared to criticize the President for his hate speech.

And yesterday, yesterday, a man armed with guns and filled with hatred entered a Jewish Synagogue shot and killed 11 worshippers, and wounded others, including police officers. The week prior, a white supremacist group called the Proud Boys were charged with beating up people outside of a bar in Pittsburgh.

It seems as if "Hate" has found a new home in our country, or maybe it always has?

I am going to be honest with you this morning, and share some of my perspectives on the rise of "hate" and "hate speech."

Hate-speech, which is a speech or words of hatred targeted at a particular group of people, has found its political mouth-piece in the President, and yes, I said the President. From his acceptance speech at the GOP National Convention, he has used hate speech to rally people to his particular vision for America.

He has used the Presidential podium to blame and mock the media, Democrats, minorities, women, immigrants, the poor, frankly, anyone who disagrees with him. Hate and fear-mongering has become his default speech.

While "hate" and "hate-speech" and "hate crimes" have always been a part of who we are in America, this President and his followers have allowed the ugly underside of who we are as a nation to become mainstream.

Shall we continue to let "hate" define us as a nation and as a people? It is certainly easy to do and demands little of us, especially when it comes to reflecting on our own responsibilities and actions in relation to our nation, communities, and neighbors.

But even more to the point, how are we as the people of God, who sit here in this house of worship, praising the One in whose image we are all created, while seeking to follow Jesus, a Jew, who commands us to love one another as he loved, who also reminds us that the two greatest commandments are to "Love God and Love our neighbors as ourselves" respond to the infestation of "Hate" and "Fear" taking hold in our world?

I have shared this Fredrik Backman quote with you before, and it is worth our reflecting on again: "Hate can be a deeply stimulating emotion. The world becomes easier to understand and much less terrifying if you divide everything and everyone into friends and enemies, we and they, good and evil. The easiest way to unite a group isn't through love, because love is hard; it makes demands. Hate is simple. So the first thing that happens in a conflict is that we choose a side, because that's easier than trying to hold two thoughts in our heads at the same time. The second thing that happens is that we seek out facts that confirm what we want to believe - comforting facts, ones that permit life to go on as normal. The third is that we dehumanize our enemy."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, Love is far more demanding and challenging. Love requires us to look within ourselves, acknowledge our own human failings and tendencies towards evil, fear, and hatred, and then own up to them, begin to see the sacred light that dwells within us as it does in all human beings. When we love, we can rise together, letting our better human nature regain its footing in our lives and in our relationships - globally, nationally, and locally.

So, shall we, as followers of Jesus, who, like all other people, are created in the sacred and holy image of God, continue to let hate, fear, and blame feed us? Or will we finally stand together in love, and let our sacred light shine, driving out the darkness that is consuming us?

We can ask ourselves, and should, how will we respond as Americans to hate? But more importantly, how are we as followers of Jesus, who taught us how to love one another, even our enemies, to respond?

Amen.