

A Song from a Different Sea

Matthew 5: 38-48; Psalm 96: 1-6, 11-13

It's the same old song. The same old, terrible hurt-filled, hate-filled song, its chorus far too familiar. Here are but a few of its verses:

At 10:22 a.m. on the morning of September 15, 1963, some 200 church members were gathered in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—many attending Sunday school classes before the start of the 11 am service—when a bomb detonated on the church's east side, scattering mortar and bricks from the front of the church and caving in its interior walls.

Most parishioners were able to evacuate the building as it filled with smoke, but four young girls (11-year-old Denise McNair and 14-year-olds Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Carole Robertson) were not among them. Their bodies were found beneath the rubble in a basement restroom, innocent victims of the violence. Twenty-two others suffered injuries. The bombing was a domestic terrorist hate crime, carried out by white supremacists.¹

Second Verse, same as the first.

At just after 5 a.m. on February 25, 1994, while 800 Palestinian Muslims were at morning prayer in Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque, Baruch Goldstein, a member of a far-right ultranationalist Israeli group entered the mosque and opened fire on the gathered worshippers. The picture onscreen is the serene scene that some of you may recall from Grace's visits to the mosque on our trips to Israel/Palestine. But the serenity belies the horrific history. Twenty-nine Palestinians were killed in the mosque that day, some as young as twelve, and 125 were wounded. The shooting was an act of (does this sound familiar?) racial and religious terrorism. A physician by training and by trade, Goldstein had previously refused to treat Arab or Druze patients and had written a letter to the New York Times saying that

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/birmingham-church-bombing>

Israel must “act decisively to remove the Arab minority from within its borders.”²

Third verse, same as the first.

On June 17, 2015, Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, murdered eight African American church members and their pastor, Clementa Pinckney, at an evening prayer service at the famed Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Three other members survived with injuries. Roof, who is to this day unrepentant, espoused a toxic agenda of racial hatred and admitted that his motive in perpetrating the attack was to try to start a race war.³

Fourth verse, same as the first.

On October 27, 2018, at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a gunman entered sabbath day services and opened fire with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and other weapons, killing eleven Jewish worshippers and injuring seven more. The motive? Anti-Semitism. The perpetrator also believed in the white genocide conspiracy theory, which holds that low Caucasian birth rates, racial integration, racial mixing, and mass immigration are contributing to the downfall of the white race in America and elsewhere.⁴

Fifth verse, may God have mercy on us all, same as the first.

On March 15, only Friday, a man attacked worshippers at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Mosque in Christchurch New Zealand, killing at least 50 and injuring dozens. Those killed included faithful Muslims from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. The alleged perpetrator was en route to commit further mayhem when he was run off the road and detained by police. Prior to the attack, he had posted a white supremacist manifesto online. When taken into court, he did not enter a plea agreement but made a white supremacist hand gesture.

Now this saddest of songs did not begin in Birmingham, nor will it end with Christchurch. Its hatred is not confined to attacks on faith communities—the same hate song was in Charlottesville, where Tiki torch bearing neo-

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave_of_the_Patriarchs_massacre

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charleston_church_shooting

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pittsburgh_synagogue_shooting

Nazis chanted “Blood and soil,” and “One people, one nation, end immigration,” and “Jews will not replace us.” It has been witnessed on campuses at our nation’s universities, institutions of higher learning where nooses have been hung in hallways or from trees. It has found voice in spray painted swastikas on ballfields and bridge abutments. It has been heard in online manifestos and Facebook posts and dog whistle tweets. It has been directed at Muslims, at Jews, at refugees, and immigrants, and racial ethnic minorities, and transgendered or homosexual sisters and brothers. And I begin in this fashion not to glorify the violence but to mourn the countless victims and to name the reality.

You see, when events like these occur and recur, a familiar chorus goes up—the perpetrator was a lone wolf. Isolated incident. Freak occurrence. The problem was mental illness and not a societal or even a worldwide human sickness (though the Christchurch perpetrator had traveled to Bulgaria, to Romania, to Hungary, presumably becoming radicalized along the way). The problem is not us. Some of our best friends are _____ . We, collectively, don’t have a hate problem, or a heart problem. How could this have happened?

And after each occurrence or recurrence of the hate song, we are left asking what are we to do, what are we Americans to do, what are we citizens of the world to do, what are people of faith to do?

Well, of course, there could be, there should be, there need to be policy answers, if we can muster the political will, though I doubt we can muster much political will. There are thorny issues to sort out about the line between preserving free speech and preventing hate speech, between online privacy concerns and policing the internet, between preserving personal liberty and the right to bear arms and upholding public safety. The weapons, by the way, in all instances, were legally acquired, they were legally acquired, they were legally acquired, they were legally acquired.

But for all the needed conversations, we won’t legislate our way out of the problem, because you can’t legislate your way out of a disease of the human heart. So, what is the faith response to be, what is OUR RESPONSE going to be?

Well, we can reach out, open our hearts, open our doors. A simple beginning place is a meal and conversation we will be having next Sunday

with some members from the Ezher Bloom mosque. Our Muslim sisters and brothers have often invited us to join them for Iftar dinners, and a number of them will be coming to work alongside us in a service project preparing food packs, and then afterward, we'll have a covered dish lunch. Let us outdo ourselves in welcome. I had an opportunity to reach out to the mosque's imam, Sami Kocak, who writes, "Thank you for sharing our sadness, praying for terrorist attack victims and thank you for your prayers for our brothers and sisters. Today we are more united, our brotherhood and sisterhood is stronger, we love and respect each other more. Please say our thanks to your congregation members."

Beyond occasional fellowship, however, we can be intentional in our outreach, confessing that we as a society have been othering people we should be brothering or mothering. That is to say, we have treated as foreigners those whom we are called by Christ to treat as family. We speak of walls and not of welcome.

Secondly, we can condemn hatred, intolerance, and extremism in all its forms. We can speak out, for inclusion, for tolerance, for extreme hospitality. But those responses—gracious outreach to our neighbors and the condemnation of the obvious—those are the low hanging fruit, and the place where it becomes challenging is the higher calling.

In our text from Matthew's gospel, in his sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For if you love ONLY those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet ONLY your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." And we might be tempted to write off "love your enemy" as an impossible injunction, an admirable aphorism, a sort of a serving suggestion, your results may vary.....except Jesus is consistent in his preaching and his modeling of this truth.

We believe in Speak softly and carry a big stick. In Luke's gospel, Jesus heals the ear of the high priest's servant who is among those who have come to arrest him. Jesus, from the cross itself, says "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Why—because the tools of violence cannot produce lasting peace, and words of hate, even words that hate the hater, can never sow love.

Paul, in Romans writes, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Carefully consider what is right

in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone. You

are responsible for your part, for your part, for your part. And that means love the people

with the tiki torches, and that means love the haters and that means loving people for what

they may yet become and not for what they presently are. And that seems impossibly

hard and why would we ever do that and certainly God can't mean or expect that. How will we ever end the hate song unless we stand up, outmuscle, overpower the haters?

I came across an article this week, also from Australia and New Zealand, and it suddenly made all of these texts clear to me in a different way. The article, written in 2017 and published in the Atlantic, spoke of the work of a team from the University of Queensland, led by a scientist named Michael Noad, that has for the last thirty years been studying the songs of humpback whales. The songs, which are made up of melodic moans and intonations and even riffs akin to human rhymes, are not random, nor are they individualized. Rather they are, call them cultural, collective communication, shared among a pod of whales.

In the 1990's, the article records, the humpback whales of Eastern Australia shared and communicated with a song that researchers had somewhat arbitrarily named, "The pink song," as a way of identifying it

when they heard and reheard and reheard it. But in 1995, a small group of whales from the west side of the continent came into the area, and they brought a new song: the black song, it was called, as a way of distinguishing it from the pink song.

So, you had a group of whales singing and communicating with the pink song and another group singing and communicating with the black song, and a very small group, only 3 of 112 identified whales, began singing a new song. It began to subtly but significantly vary the pink song, incorporating lilts and trills from the black song, bending old themes into new ones. Eventually the previously dominant, omnipresent pink song forever changed, and the whales were singing a different tune.⁵ Do you hear that powerful image? An entire whale society changed its tune.

And that, my friends, is the task before us. For years, there has been a significant song afoot in human history, a song as I said at the outset, of hurt, and of hate, and of outrage at the other. The same old song. The same old song.

But we are the hearers of a new song. And we are called to bring that song and to sing that song, to overlay it, to substitute it, to sing it until the other song is changed, is changed, is forever changed. And we cannot change the old song by becoming swept up in the singing of it. That is why we cannot return hurt for hurt, or hate for hate, or fight fire with fire. We must change the intolerable song by singing an improbable one.

And remember the ratio—researchers originally isolated just 3 contrarian singers in the pod of 112, three to change the melody, three to reconstruct the theme. That's the way the kingdom comes, by the way. Jesus speaks of it starting out as small as a mustard seed, but flourishing into the greatest of shrubs, with branches for all the birds of the air to nest. He speaks of it as being like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Our task, our calling, our identity, is to be 3 in 112, leaven in the loaf, singers of a song from a different sea.

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/07/humpback-whales-remix-old-songs-with-new-ones/534636/>

The song is already among us. After the shooting at the Mother Emanuel Church, the American public was shocked by the public profession of forgiveness that came within days from the families of the victims. Forgiveness unasked for by Dylan Roof, forgiveness undeserved. And everyone said, it is too soon, it can't be true, it cannot be sincere. But the Mother Emanuel members simply said it is our culture, it is our teaching, it is our calling—we cannot NOT forgive. We won't wait to feel forgiveness before we profess it. We will profess it until we feel it and are changed by it.

I saw also a post that said the first victim of the shooting in New Zealand is seen on a video standing at the door of the mosque. He is heard saying "Hello, brother," to the shooter before he is brutally killed. His last word to his killer is "brother." And which message do you think will last? Which one will spread? Which one will be shared virally? Which will change the world? The killer's manifesto of hatred and rage? Or the one who called even a hate-filled, hurting, misguided soul, "brother?"

Sing to the Lord a NEW song the Psalmist writes, sing a new song, sing all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD; for he is coming for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

And this new song, this hardest of songs, this contrarian love song in the face of the world's hate? How are we to sing it? Bravely. Faithfully. Lovingly. Endlessly. Until we all at last become the song. My life flows on in endless song;
above earth's lamentation, I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn
that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?
Amen.

