

Several weeks ago I received an email inviting my participation in a counter-protest happening in Charlottesville, Virginia. People from a non-Mennonite faith community I was a part of in D.C. invited people of faith to a non-violent collective action to protest Neo-Nazis, alt-right supporters, and White nationalists gathering to respond to the city's intent to take down a statue of Robert E. Lee. I knew this love of Robert E. Lee well. Where I lived in Arlington, we had Robert E. Lee highway and Jefferson Davis highway. When I lived in the Shenandoah Valley, confederate flags popped up on graves for Memorial Day, and Confederate Memorial Day. I even remember doing a sleep study at the local hospital, and as I sat down to relax and prepare for the evening right across my bed was a portrait entitled, "General Lee in Repose." I was growing tired of this man's ubiquitous presence in my life.

As for the counter-protest, friends had told me of clergy that were gathering, and I knew my pastor was going to be among them. I was moving on the day this was all going to take place, and I felt some regret. I like going to protests, and get energy from them.

Let me rephrase that. I like going to protests when they are convenient and comfortable for me. I go when I can, for as long as I like, chanting phrases that I'm comfortable saying, and at the end of the day I get to go home safe and carry on with life as usual. Little changes for me, but I feel that I've done "my part." I'm not particularly proud of this, but this is the pattern I've made for myself.

Had I gone to Charlottesville, it would have been completely new territory for me. I watched on the news, in the days after, counter-protestors getting mowed down by a car that came charging through a crowd. Like many of you, I saw white (mostly) men carrying tiki torches shouting phrases like "blood and soil" and "white lives matter." I saw pictures of counter protestors of color who were beaten up by people carrying Nazi flags. I was thankful that no one I knew was hurt, but I also thought of the many more who ended up in the hospital, and of the young woman and two officers who lost their lives.

What deeply disturbs me about these alt-right people clamoring to, as they claim, "preserve history," is that they look like so many people I know. They look like the

guy at the grocery store, or a local businessman, or the person that lives a few doors down. There's nothing written on them that says "Nazi," there is no badge, there's just a white, angry face in a sea of other white, angry faces. What also bothers me is that these white, angry faces claim to be worshipping the same God I do, claiming that their God believes in their cause.

But as Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III stated, "Whiteness is their god, privilege is their icon, rage is their prayer life, supremacy is their heaven. Be not discouraged, Love is the manifestation of God. Justice is love's spouse and liberation is their child." But how did we get from liberation to bondage in hate?

The alt-right has formed what Brain McClaren in Time magazine has labeled "Alt-Christianity." McClaren states that the alt-right gives disenfranchised white people a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging, something that the church is supposed to but has failed to give. I would take this a step further and say that white supremacy in this country has also formed an alt-theology, a narcissistic, twisted view of scripture and ecclesiology that puts white people in the front and at the center, valuing white lives, feelings, and thoughts over all others. I have allowed this to happen. We as a church have allowed this to happen.

It comes across in statements that are seemingly harmless. Some Christians say they want a return of the "old time religion" of the 1950s, the cultural and moral values of that age. Also an age where people of color were excluded from worshipping with white folk, where Jim Crow was alive and well. Or this concept of "blessing." If you have lots of resources, wealth, and time, God has blessed you immensely and you are highly favored. Or it comes across in more institutional ways. You're welcome, but not welcome to be in a position of change-maker. Quite possibly it's in the form of a really well-meaning white person that has a "heart" for "the downtrodden," seeing people of color as second class citizens that just need a hand up from a White savior. Whether that savior is Jesus or themselves is anyone's guess.

For the most part, Mennonites have cast off the "health and wealth" gospel, and many embrace the progression toward a more inclusive theology, but that wasn't always the case. White supremacy came across in the Mennonite church in the

1940s, where Virginia Conference decided they would be “conforming to the general attitude of society in the South toward the intermingling of the two races.” Therefore, the rites of the church, such as baptism and communion, were segregated. When asked by Fannie and Ernest Swartzendruber, church leaders at Gay Street Mennonite in Harrisonburg for the scriptural authority to make such decisions, conference leaders said “as a matter of expediency we must make some distinction to meet existing conditions.” This legacy of exclusion can also extend into today in really subtle ways like, “So what’s your last name?” Or “So where did you go to school?” if it’s said in such a way as to determine the value of the other person.

This example and many others remind us that we have been complicit in white supremacy and we have inherited a legacy of exclusion. Even though we may not view ourselves as racist, very few of us are exempt from not benefiting from a system that values white folks over others. But we also have a lot to celebrate, because our Christian tradition also has a legacy of folks standing up to systems of oppression. The Christian church was very active in the civil rights movement, some denominations were active in the movement to end slavery, and even now, churches across the US and around the world are working to dismantle oppression.

In the midst of our history, Jesus calls us to take up our cross and to follow him. Because if we cling to our life, we will lose it, if we lose it for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel, we can seek to gain it. But what does that mean?

For those of us like myself who have a strong affinity for public theology, or thinking about God in a way that relates and is relevant to public discourse, events such as Charlottesville remind us that we cannot ignore God’s commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves and denounce social movements of bigotry and hatred towards others. Where the church has often been silent, or even complacent in the oppression of others, we are called to be missionaries of justice, carrying the Good News of God’s transformative love and healing power to those that are hurting. But more than that, we are also called to stand in solidarity with those on the margins.

The church is guilty of several transgressions, many of them being born out of a sense of comfort, entitlement, and prosperity. Firstly, the church has turned a blind eye to the subtle and overt racism happening in the American context. Whether that be ignoring the events of Charlottesville, passing over leaders of color for “names and faces we know,” or using our funds for “safe” causes, we have created an environment where no one is challenged to look racism in the face, or even confront someone with thoughts or ideas different from our own.

It’s difficult to be motivated from complacency to action when we are not directly involved. When it’s not our family, our daughter, or son, or mother, or father, we have the privilege put these issues on the proverbial back burner. And there are many of us for whom this is not the case, this is our family and our loved ones, or even ourselves, but we just don’t know what to do. And my goal is not to shame us on this fact, it’s to urge us to look to Jesus and see that he’s calling us to a different way. Jesus is calling us to look outside of ourselves and our experience, to look at the experience of the other. Jesus is calling us to take up our cross, which has time and time again proven to be the burden of the oppressed and the marginalized. We are encouraged to take this cross and follow Jesus.

The path of taking up your cross is difficult. Jesus was spat upon, reviled, called names, threatened, and we should expect no less. The work in dismantling white supremacy and racism is not safe or comfortable. Hopefully, as Mennonites, we’re used to being “a bit weird” and persecution is nothing new for us. However, as we are mostly white, some may have come to expect a certain amount of privilege and ease in our lives. I believe Jesus is calling us to “lose” this life, as stated in the text. Of course, Jesus is also talking about martyrdom. We share in our mutual Christian history a plethora of folks who literally lost their lives for the sake of the Gospel, and even in modern times, MJ Sharp lost his life while working for peace in the Congo. But I don’t believe this is the only meaning of the text. I believe that “losing” our life can mean losing our veiled white supremacist thinking, ingrained in many of us of all races and nationalities over the years of privileges and passes being afforded people with white skin, for the sake of the Gospel that welcomes everyone to, as Isaiah states, “worship on God’s holy mountain.”

Along with the words of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah has a lot to say about how God accepts people on the margins, as we can see in Isaiah 56. Commentators say that some questioned God's acceptance of them, the eunuchs and the foreigners, as they were sons and daughters of the stranger. God's extension of radical love extends to everyone, not just Israelites, and this is made clear in these passages from Isaiah. God wanted to expand the vision of Israel beyond her borders, not just for a certain race of people. Professor Ingrid Lilly states that the people that God chose to invite in likely included Ammonites and Moabites, enemy neighbors, not just any neighbors, making this gathering of believers highly political. Isaiah states, "I will bring them to my holy mountain, and give them joy in my house of prayer." This indicates worship that has a lot of cultural richness, a community of very different people worshipping God together. What would we need to give up from our end to engage in that type of worship?

It's silly to think someone can give up all of their white privilege, and living in the bodies that we do in the day and age that we do, it's impossible. But we can give up white supremacist thinking, in other words, thinking that white culture, a white way of doing things, and people who look white should be given the highest authority. Giving up our thinking that white people should always be in positions of power. Giving up our thinking that white people know best concerning the way forward for our communities, or for our country, or for our church.

There are myriad ways we can "lose" our lives and give up some of our privilege, some of our white supremacist thinking for the sake of the Gospel. I certainly don't have answers, but people who've done this work for decades have influenced this line of ecclesiological thinking. I believe we can take some of our cues from Jesus. Firstly, be willing to have the conversation. If we can't talk about race, or privilege, or ableism, or bigotry, we're doomed to continue in the patterns we've been keeping. Jesus was not afraid to confront issues head on, and spoke on many difficult issues. If we acknowledge what we don't understand, or admit to one another where we've fallen short, we can hold one another accountable to a more Christian way of being. One lesson I've learned is don't rely on people of color to educate you on issues regarding race. Do some of the work yourself. Read up on white privilege, if you're not a reader, there are Ted Talks,

podcasts, documentaries, and a host of other resources out there available to you.

Second, know your neighbors. Goshen is a very diverse community, and we are very blessed to have so much diversity in a town this size. Get to know people who don't look like you. Jesus sought out people on the margins, people that other "religious folks" wouldn't talk to. Who would those people be in Goshen? It's difficult to make generalizations and create policies against certain people when you have a personal connection. Maybe take your patronage to a business owned by immigrants. I'm certainly not suggesting you leave Berkey, but attend a worship service with primarily people of color on a regular basis. Strike up a conversation with a neighbor who doesn't look like you. Make genuine, honest connections with people and see where opening the lines of communication take you.

Third, use your privilege to invite people of color to the table. Jesus promoted radical hospitality, so we should be inviting people who are normally not invited to participate into positions of power. We need look no further than our own denomination to see that leadership is mostly white, in spite of the growing diversity of the Mennonite Church. Part of dismantling racism and white supremacy in our denomination is having leadership that reflects our congregations. And while there is some diversity reflected, we still have a long way to go. What if our committees, or leadership teams, or the boards of our organizations had more people of color represented? What would it look like to genuinely include folks of color, not just fill a quota we feel like we need? I believe it would be difficult, rocky, and require a shift in our way of thinking. But I also know this is possible. I know I personally have a lot to give up, a lot for which to repent, and a whole lot more to learn. But the good news is that our God is present to us in the midst of us trying to figure ourselves out.

I think we saw the future of the church in the counter-protesters and the clergy gathered at Charlottesville. The church is full of young people, old people, people of color and white folks, showing up and speaking out against racism and hatred. These people are singing together, praying together, eating together, and being

church together. A hymn that has been important to me in justice work has been “My soul cries out” which is found in Sing the Story, also known as “Canticle of the turning.” The chorus states “My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.” The world is about to turn towards justice, if we are inclined to pick up our cross and follow Jesus.