

“Too Deep”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Romans 8:26-39
August 13, 2017 - Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Some of you here have met my dear friend, the Rev. Paul Byrd, who is the Oncology chaplain at Children’s of Alabama. Paul is more than a dozen years older than me, but he is even sillier than I am. Paul is a country boy from Statesboro, Georgia, where they used to grease a pig on the Fourth of July, and if you caught the pig, you got to keep it. Paul is one of the best people I know.

In the late 90s, Paul was working at All Children’s Hospital in St. Petersburg, Florida. Every day he’d have to call the hospital operator to have pages for the on-call chaplain switched on and then off for his personal beeper. He got to know the voices of the operators and would make silly little jokes with them, because that’s what Paul does.

One afternoon, a malfunctioning beeper sent him to the bowels of the hospital, the basement where the operators’ office was. Before the operator got three words of greeting out, Paul jumped for joy. “I’ve been talking to you for five years and I’ve never meet you! Until now!”

The woman laughed, and they got lost in a conversation about their experiences at the hospital. “So where did you grow up?” Paul asked.

“Well, I was born in Statesboro, Georgia,” she replied.

Paul got very excited. “Statesboro! I’m from Statesboro! How cool! Oh my gosh, have you been back recently?” She hadn’t been back since her childhood. “Oooh! You really need to go back! It’s really changed a lot.”

“Well, Paul, I’m glad to hear that. But I don’t think I will ever go back to Statesboro.”

“No! You have to! It’s really cool, how nice things have gotten.”

This went on for a few minutes, with the woman politely deflecting Paul’s insistence that she had to go back to her hometown and see. Finally, a bit exasperated, she said, “Chaplain Paul, do you want to know why I won’t ever go back to Statesboro?” “Okay,” he smiled.

The woman's father had owned a small farm just outside of town. She told Paul a little bit about what it was like to grow up as a young black girl in Statesboro in the mid-1940s. Then she told him about her last night on the farm, when she was ten years-old.

She remembered being woken out of a dead sleep by her father, shaking her. "Get up. Go out the back door. Go with your mother. Run into those woods. And hide." She and her siblings and her mother ran through the dark fields into the forest. When they got to the tree line, she looked back. She saw a group of men in white hoods. She saw flames engulfing her house. And she saw her father, hanged from a tree in the front yard.

The Klan wanted her father's land and had been strongly suggesting he sell it. He wouldn't. They got rid of him and his family.

I called Paul yesterday afternoon to make sure I had the details of the story right and to ask if I could tell it to you this morning. When he got to the end, he said, "It's been nearly twenty years since that woman told me what happened to her in Statesboro. That place is my home. That place murdered her father. Twenty years, and I still don't know what to say."

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

As a kid in the 1980s, I mostly saw white nationalist groups being interviewed by Phil Donahue for his talk show, or in the occasional news clip of them holding a sad little rally somewhere. Maybe you saw the clip from a couple years ago of a march in Columbia, South Carolina. This was shortly after the shootings at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston. The subsequent removal of the Confederate flag from the statehouse grounds prompted a call to march from the local KKK. The video from the day that went viral was of a young man marching on the sidewalk, keeping up with the klansmen, playing his sousaphone comically. It made them look like clowns. That's what these groups had become to us: clowns.

Of course, when I say "us," I sound a lot like Paul did in his excitement about Statesboro. I don't think men in white hoods have ever looked like silly clowns to anyone but white people who had never been afraid of them.

Friday night and yesterday, in Charlottesville, Virginia, they didn't even wear their hoods. They came to the campus of the University of Virginia at night, bearing tiki torches straight out of your uncle's backyard — which somehow looked both beyond ridiculous

and absolutely terrifying. They call themselves the alt-right. But really, they are racists, plain and simple. They chanted “Blood and soil!” — a racist ideology developed in the late 19th Century and popularized in Nazi Germany.

They were protesting the removal of a statue of General Lee. Their rally yesterday was met with counter-protests. A group of clergy held hands and sang “This Little Light of Mine” as armed militia members stood feet away. Violence broke out repeatedly throughout the day between the protesting groups, and you may have seen the spine-chilling video of a man driving his car into the crowd, injuring several and killing one person. When that exact act happens in London or Paris, we call it terrorism. What we have seen is deeply unsettling demonstrations by radical fundamentalist white nationalist Christians. They are no longer goofy clowns on afternoon talkshows.

There was a Facebook post flying around the internet late last night that showed these folks waving both the Confederate flag and flags with swastikas on them. Below, it read: “You don’t get to be both a Nazi and a proud American. We literally had a war about this. The whole world was involved.”

Dr. Jenny McBride is a professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at my alma mater, McCormick Theological Seminary. Dr. McBride received both of her graduate degrees from the University of Virginia. So it was right there in Charlottesville that she studied German pastors’ resistance to the Third Reich.

When Hitler rose to power, the popular thing for churches to do was to go with the flow and allow Christianity to be merged with National Socialism. Most Germans took the melding of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic slogans were equated with Christian truth. But a group resisted, from the early 30s onward. Our denomination takes as one of its Confessions the Theological Declaration of Barmen, written as a direct appeal to the churches of Germany to resist and stand firm against Christian accommodation to the Nazis.

Barmen declares: “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to [God’s] creatures.” Godless fetters. Fetters are shackles. Tell us about fetters that would try to keep us from God, St. Paul:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life,

nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I did not want to preach about white supremacy this morning. Heck, I thought I'd have a hard enough time talking about nuclear missiles! I wanted to tell you about this passage from Romans and how it is so dear to my heart because it just might be the passage I have read out loud the most times. I wanted to tell you how I've read it at countless hospital beds in my years as a chaplain — to the old and weary in Chicago and to parents of young children in Birmingham. I was hoping to tell you how I read this text at St. Vincent's on Thursday afternoon just before anointing Marilyn Merkle's head, hours before she died.

My point was going to be that this text rises like cream whenever someone I encounter is in need of blessed assurance. When we are sick. When we are scared. When death has shown up and is doing cartwheels on the front lawn. When we wonder if God might have gone to play golf. When it feels like the walls are creeping in and the door is closing, cutting us off from the love that has sustained us.

Our nation is sick and scared and there are tiki torches in college towns and instead of hoods they are showing up with clubs and bats. I have mouthed off from this pulpit about how I believe the president and his administration have normalized vile and demeaning and racist language and behavior, inviting this stuff out from the shadows in which it was lying dormant, but alive. But this stuff certainly isn't new.

The U.S. has a lot of work to do on race. To pretend otherwise is the definition of privilege. It is to smile at the operator and say "But you see, you really ought to go back to Statesboro!" We can at least start by admitting that Charlottesville is a big deal, even if it doesn't feel like a big deal to suburban, middle-class white Protestants. And we can at least agree to unambiguously denounce these marchers, and call their ideology sin, as we ask every non-white, non-Christian group to do when terror is brought by someone of their faith or race.

That would be the least we could do in response. Yet even that seems to be a bridge too far for the most powerful man in the world who, by the way, calls himself a Presbyterian. If God is for us, who is against us? We are fans of complexity in all things at this church. But on the question of racism, there are not many sides, many sides. We have a choice between a full-throated rejection of such horror, or complicity with whatever havoc it wreaks.

For followers of Christ, our spiritual health is at stake when, even in this broken world, klansman and Nazis are not ridiculous buffoons, but bold marchers whose faith and patriotism are not chastised as mockeries of both words.

I have painted a grim picture here, but that is where we are. Naïveté is not an option. But neither is hopelessness. As Christians, we know that Sunday always comes. There is surprise at the tomb. He has risen. He is not here. No earthy fetter can separate us from the love of Christ. Not even the moon can block out light for very long.

When Dr. King was jailed right here in Birmingham, fifty-four years ago, he wrote:

“Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.”

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever!
Amen.