

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 24:13-35
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-4,12-19
1 Peter 1:17-23

April 26, 2020
The Third Sunday of Easter

I heard an interview the other day with Megan Phelps-Roper. If that name doesn't ring a bell, let me fill you in. She is the granddaughter of the founder of Westboro Baptist Church. Megan had been on picket lines since she was five, indoctrinated into a world of extreme hate and condemnation...towards LGBT individuals, towards Jews, towards service men and women who served what Westboro considered a "ungodly" country.

Her image has been plastered on media outlets as she proudly held hate-filled banners.

You might define her as the worst kind of human being. Ignorant, bigoted, anti-Semitic, homophobic. You might even think she was the kind of human who is unredeemable. If you encountered her, you might find yourself wanting to fight back, wanting to argue to prove to her how awful and misguided she was. To fight fire with fire. That would be understandable. Our first inclination is often to react in anger.

But, Megan would want you to reconsider your tactics. Here's why...

In 2009, she joined Twitter. At first, it was to more actively spread Westboro's message. To target and attack the people whom God was surely going to punish if they didn't change their "evil" ways.

But, her messages of hate were soon met with an unexpected response. She began targeting a Jewish man, David Kelsey, who heads up a number of Jewish media outlets. To her shock, David didn't meet her hate with more hate. He met it with questions and sincere conversation. He met her accusations with curiosity and calmness. They began a long journey of discovery together. And it started to change everything for Megan. This person whom she was taught to hate, was showing her grace.

She says that his kindness led her to begin questioning what she had been taught all of her life. And as their trust grew and as his communication continued down this path of kindness, an opening happened. Megan started to recognize inconsistencies in what she had been taught to believe. Because of David's patience and desire to build a relationship across their divide, she was able to allow her heart to open.

The grace extended to her gave her the courage to admit her wrongs and leave Westboro Baptist Church. Grace transformed her. She now is a vocal advocate for peace and reconciliation.

Her story struck me as an incredibly important one for us to hear at this particular moment in time. Not because we will necessarily encounter someone as extreme as Megan once was, but because we are all challenged with finding ways to extend grace to one another in this terribly divided world we find ourselves. Not to mention, we may be quarantined with someone we do not get along with or someone whom we have long held unresolved issues. We may be struggling with how to communicate and how to rebuild broken relationships.

And then, I read our text from First Peter and here is what it says...

²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

Love one another deeply from the heart.

Let's talk for a minute about what's going on in First Peter. The writer of First Peter is describing how we identify as people of faith. Who are we and how we got here. It wrestles with what we have been taught by the world (or our families or our communities) vs. what God teaches. It names our struggle of what values we will choose to uphold. And, it is clear that following Christ requires a complete transformation of our identity...down to our core...down to our hearts and our souls.

18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. 20 He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. 21 Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

The author of First Peter says that this transformation, of setting your faith and hope on God, requires that we learn about God's character, who God is and who God wants us to be. When we do that, our old way of living will seem completely out of balance to this new way of life. And, this new way of life requires us to offer this radical grace to one another.

And sometimes, that means we will have to reevaluate what we have been taught.

This is what Megan experienced through her conversations with individuals, like David, who extended radical grace to her. Because she was shown grace, she found courage to transform her life. She found the true meaning of love and the reality of hope.

Now...most of us don't find ourselves in this kind of extreme hate-filled community, but it does make me wonder how much we are holding onto hate in our hearts. Or, maybe it's judgement or jealousy. Maybe we have given up on someone we once loved. Maybe we have become complacent that relationships can heal. Maybe we are scared to take the steps necessary to claim our own redemption for fear of how that might disrupt the status quo.

Well...it might disrupt things. It might be risky. Transformation and healing aren't necessarily simple solutions. But grace reminds us that they are possible.

In a Ted Talk on her journey out of hate, Megan provides four steps that opened her heart to change. They are these...

- 1) When faced with conflict...don't assume bad intent from the other person. When we assume ill intent, we immediately cut off our ability to listen and understand that the other person has their opinions for a reason (no matter how hateful or harmful they may be) based upon a lifetime of experience and teaching. Assuming ill intent only leads to anger and it destroys our ability to communicate.
- 2) Ask questions. Be curious about what the other person believes even if it's hard to hear. Let them know they are heard. And then, together the questions between both parties can start to grow into honest dialogue.
- 3) Stay calm. Megan states that "I thought my rightness justified my rudeness -- harsh tones, raised voices, insults, interruptions -- but that strategy is ultimately counterproductive." So, take a breath, pause, change the subject. Come back to the conversation when you can regain your patience and your ability to listen. This isn't a race to resolution.
- 4) Make the argument. This doesn't mean to argue in an angry way. When I worked with college students we called this step, "Ouch, then educate." It's when we are able to tell someone why their perspective hurts. But you can only do that once you have built upon the previous three steps.

I also want you to notice one other important example from our readings today. When Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus, he doesn't get upset that he isn't recognized or understood. He simply begins walking and talking with his followers. He doesn't make a grand statement of how he was wronged. He doesn't seek vengeance or get angry. He comes back quietly to simply walk alongside others and he listens. And when Jesus finally speaks, when he points out what they are missing, they slowly are able to claim their own transformation and believe.

That's the gift of radical grace.

I want all of us to consider (myself included) how we might extend that kind of radical grace to those whom we may disagree. How might we begin to listen more thoughtfully, talk more kindly, question more respectfully? How might we live into God's love for us and for one another?

²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

Amen.