

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
August 12 & 13, 2017  
Rich Phenow  
Trending: #cantweallgetalong | Matthew 5:43-48**

Last week we began a new series we are calling “Trending”, and I don’t want to assume that you are like me—not many people are—but I come this morning lamenting, heavy hearted, over the actions that happened in Charlottesville yesterday. We should all be lamenting. See, because hate tried to make a home through those public displays of racism and white nationalism, with protestors carrying signs that said, “White is right”, “KKK”, “Neo-Nazi”, and “White Supremacy”. We have to pray this morning that God would open our hearts and that He would open our minds. That He would speak to us powerful words. Words of reconciliation, words of peace, because the spirit of God is here, and we have to look to Christ at moments like this to guide us. To guide us in the right direction towards peace and love and justice for all. We know that we are living in troubled times, in a troubled and broken world, and it seems as though every day is filled with some kind of turmoil and fighting, and I find myself anticipating what’s next. I find myself coming home daily to find out what’s new, what’s next? The political climate is vicious on all sides and we are bombarded with constant smears where nobody is safe. See, political correctness is out the door because we live in a time where we can say whatever we want, whenever we want, about anybody we want in real time. And filters? They’re optional.

Last week we started this series “Trending” and we talked about social media, about it’s benefits, but we also talked about it’s shortcomings and downfalls. When I was talking with the children, I talked about the idea that there are good things and there are bad things, and the good things can become bad things...like candy is a good thing, but too much is a bad thing, sunshine is a good thing but too much and you’ll get sunburned, hot peppers are a good thing no matter what. But, we were talking about the reality that these iPads and these games on the cell phone can serve as a way for kids to disconnect with each other, for kids to stop playing and to stop engaging with each other in creative play. It’s a way for kids to block out the other noise in their lives—the voice of their parents.

There were a lot of good insights that came out of that panel we had last week, and it was wonderful to hear their perspectives, but for me the loudest voice that came out of that was Maggie Keller’s—no actually it was her mother’s voice. See, when she was young Maggie’s mom told her that how we talk and treat others, especially those that wait on us in restaurants, is a statement about who we are. If we’re rude or impatient, if we are demanding and mean-spirited, it’s a reflection of our heart. It’s a true reflection of who we are. And she went on to say that how we treat each other on Facebook, the mean spirited, hurtful, hateful things that we are able to say—it doesn’t take a lot of courage to say because it’s not face-to-face—but those are about us at our core, and we really need to stop saying them. See, I want to say if we can’t talk to each other

directly, maybe we shouldn't have personal conversations publically. Here's my quote; I think it's a good one and I give you permission to use it. "We need to ditch Facebook and we need to do face-to-face time in the same space." See, we're avoiding each other. We're saying things we really ought not to be saying, but we can say them because we aren't face-to-face. So let's take those conversations in the context of each other's presence and have the courage to say the things that need to be said—not for everybody's ears, but for those of you who are saying things to others that are hurtful. I have a friend that I had lunch with this week and he said that all the people in his relational world are so polarized. They feel judged and misunderstood in almost every conversation he has. The conversations are turning into verbal arguments and fights that have become really destructive, so he decided that silence is the safest—either that or talk about the weather or the Twins. See, we're divided in so many ways. We're divided and so many pressing issues are heaped upon us: the reality of our nation's healthcare system, immigration, income and inequality, and the future reality of our planet's care—and what's happening is we are destroying each other with words and with actions. With hate filled actions of bombing a mosque in our own neighborhood in Bloomington, a hate-filled racist rally in Charlottesville...people killed, many injured, bigotry, white supremacy. We just cannot stay silent. We need to use our voices; we need to stand up with courage and call what's wrong, wrong. Tensions are high and I think the divisions are growing wider for all of us. We're all becoming immobilized; we're all becoming polarized in our fears. What's our response? What's our response as followers of Jesus? How do we respond to those troubled waters that just circle around us?

Well, I think Jesus has a response for us this morning, and it's an important response for us to look at. Jesus has been preaching on the Sea of Galilee and he has been talking about the Beatitudes—the way that we are to treat each other. We are to be peacemakers, we are to bless those who are hungry, we are to seek justice. He goes through this wonderful litany of ways that we are to bless and bless others. And then He talks about adultery, about being salt and light. He talks about the law, and at the end of the fifth chapter of Matthew, this is what Jesus says to us:

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

<sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. [Matthew 5:43-48]

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of this text in *The Message*, says that regardless of whether we are good or bad, nice or nasty, God reigns the sun and He pours his rain on us to nourish us and to feed us. Regardless of whether we are nice or nasty. And He says to us that in order for us to be the kingdom people that we have been called to be—to live a God created identity—then we have to be willing to love those who have

been hard to love. I'll be honest with you, my enemies are people that hate others. Those are my enemies...very real to me, and it's really, really hard to love them. But Jesus is talking about something different. He's talking about a radical, counter-cultural way. He wants us to do something that is very unnatural, it's very opposite. He is saying we have to love those who are the hardest to love, those who disagree with our political, our philosophical, our theological views. Now how can I even begin to love those who hate others? I don't know, but I do know I can't do it on my own. I know that I need to take some kinds of actions. Jesus is not talking about us having feelings of love for our enemies. He's using a verb; He's talking about taking action. He tells us very clearly that we are to pray for them, but we are also to speak out with our truths in respectful ways. He tells us what God has done. In John's gospel He says that He gave His best, and that He loved all of us regardless of our sin or our rebellion against God. That He gave us the best He had to offer, and that if we believed and lived like Him, reflecting His redeeming grace and love, with His strength and power, then we would be living out our God created identity. Then we would be living the way that God lives toward us. Jesus is saying that we're to live that way. We know that we can't be perfect people, but God is prodding us and pushing us to be more like Himself. So the question is: who is your enemy? Who is your enemy this morning?

I don't presume that the solutions are simple. The problems are complex, and so are the solutions. I think we need to begin to start at the micro level. We have to begin with ourselves as followers of Jesus. See, we need to examine our own hearts and ask: what is my pervasive attitude? What is my attitude about this troubled world? What am I doing or not doing to treat others the way I want to be treated? We need to ask ourselves: who am I and what do I stand for? And whose am I?

As I mentioned this week, over two hundred of us attended this global leadership conference, the GLS. Some were in Chicago, and others of us were here in Edina at Our Lady of Grace. It was an amazing time, and the metaphor we often use is that it's like drinking from a fire hydrant when all you needed was a sip of water. You just get blown away with the amazing speakers and the things that are said—the gifting. It's both for those of us in the church world and those in the business world. But the very first talk—and I had been praying, I'd been asking God, I said *I'm going to need some help with my sermon this week, so I just pray one of the speakers will give me some ideas*—but the very first talk was by this guy named Bill Hybels. He's the senior leader at Willow Creek Church, and he started off by speaking about respect. I want to say that respect is not the complete answer, but we need to consciously start somewhere. We need to build a bridge over these troubled waters. We need to start by laying down ourselves and we need to learn how to respect each other, especially when it comes to our differences. We need to learn to respect each other. Now, respect means holding the other in high regard, in high esteem. It's treating them right, treating them as valuable. It's seeing the value in all people, regardless. In 1 Peter it says this:

Show proper respect to everyone. [1 Peter 2:17]

So let me present for us a couple of boards in the bridge that we need to be building over these troubled waters...some practical ways. We need to start by affirming this truth in our soul: scripture tells us in Genesis that we are created in the image and the likeness of God. That we each bear God's image. That everybody matters to God and God has stamped His very image on each of us. Everyone that we engage with, everyone...even our enemies, were created in the image and likeness of God. They are God's treasure. Transgender, North Korean, Native American, Immigrant, Black, Whites...all of us are created in the image of God. We reflect God's very nature in which He has created us to be. We start there. I want to tell you, the people that teach me this the most are some of our special needs community in this church. We have two ministries, one called Tapestry which meets on Tuesday nights, and one called Mosaic, which meets on Sunday afternoons for worship. These are people that can teach us how to love, and I absolutely love those folks. They have been having a summer camp away from our church campus and Tuesday night happened to be the gourmet cooking night, so being the gourmet that I am (and Van Chounlamountry not necessarily being a real gourmet) we went to Jodie BJORKE's house. We had this island, and there were supposed to be seven or eight students there...fifteen showed up. We made this incredible meal...laughing and talking. It was amazing. Some of the kids were crying—those were the ones cutting the onions. But in these kids I see clearly the image of God. See, they are accepting, they are genuine, they're innocent, they're non-judgmental. They have this amazing love for each other. This is a picture of one of my favorite guys, Sebastian [picture shown]. I had just delivered Sebastian his third plate of pasta. Sebastian doesn't speak at all, but he is the most tender, warm, loving young man I know. His hugs love me to my very soul. Sebastian doesn't get a lot of dessert at home—his parents are having him eat healthier—but we snuck a couple of plates of tiramisu to him. See, we need to know that God doesn't make mistakes.

The second board is this: we can learn how to differ and disagree without demoralizing or drawing blood. We need to see our shared humanity. We need to know that there are things that bring us together, not just divide and devalue us. We have to acknowledge our differences, but we have to be able to stand together against hatred. Paul says in Colossians, everyone is a child of God, holy and dearly loved, chosen by God. We can disagree with each other agreeably.

Parker Palmer, a sociologist, says the highest form of love is the love that allows for intimacy without the alienation of the difference. See, it's our humanity and it's God's image that causes us to see what unites us and what we have in common. Now don't get me wrong...agreeing to disagree doesn't mean that we disengage and avoid our responsibility, especially when it comes at the expense of the oppressed and the marginalized. See, we need to see and we need to hear and we need to engage with the suffering—those who are discriminated against. Jesus himself spoke out against racism and sexism and elitism and classism and injustice. Scripture says our love must be sincere, and that we are to hate what is evil and cling to what is good.

The third board is this: the third board is all about listening. This to me can be one of the most difficult of all because we have to put aside our differences, our pride, our

rightness in our own opinion. We need to respect each other enough to ask good questions in order to hear and learn from each other, to hear from each other's narrative and story, to do that without interrupting the other even though it's different. What happens when we differ from somebody—when we don't agree with them—is that most of the time we do most of the talking in the discussion, or we interrupt the discussion and frequently say *No, no! You need to see it my way cause my way is the right way.* But we need to engage our ears and our hearts. Even before we can state our position or our opinion, we need to reflect back what we have heard from the other. See, we're confused. The goal of good communication is not agreement. And it doesn't happen very frequently, but the goal of good communication is understanding. We need to understand each other and that's a hard thing to work at. We need to grow in our respect of our differences.

The fourth step is this: we need to stay away from generalizations and put-downs and stereotypes. We need to stay away from narrowly defining somebody in a box that somehow we have made for them. Wisdom from Proverbs says,

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words make tempers flare.”  
[Proverbs 15:1]

I'm guilty of this. I was guilty of this in a heated conversation just a couple of nights ago. I did something that could not have shut down the conversation quicker. I said to the person I was talking to, “You are nothing but arrogant.” Now, you can imagine how well that invited more conversation. See, it was drastic; the conversation took a turn for the worse, and then our defenses were up and the conversation shut down by my name-calling, narrowly labeling the person I was in conversation with. We have to stop using hurtful words and foul language. We have to use words that enable conversation—that build the other up. We need to slash from our vocabulary those five or six words that immediately create defensiveness: “You always...” “You never...” Those generalizations put us immediately on the defensive. We need to commit ourselves to wholesome words. Paul says,

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs... [Ephesians 4:29]

This certainly applies to social media.

Step five is learning to be respectful. It's learning to admit when you are wrong and asking for forgiveness as soon as possible. Immediately. It's crucial. See, when our words and judgments hurt others, we need to humbly admit we are wrong and we need to say we are sorry. We need to be sincere. We need to ask for forgiveness quickly. If we have been hurt ourselves by others, we need to grant forgiveness. Paul says we are to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us, over and over again.

In learning to be respectful, my last point is this: we have to do the hard work of engagement. We have to do the hard work of not being silent or complacent. We have

to remain in the conversation with our enemy. This quote showed up on the internet today: “We must remain steadfast in our commitment to the Gospel, which builds bridges of reconciliation, justice, and peace for all.”

There is a young woman in my life, a young woman in my life who I learn a lot from, and she is unabashed in her teaching of me. She has taught me a lot about reconciliation and she has taught me about justice for all. She is somebody I really, really respect, and I’m going to have her speak to you to close out the sermon because these were the words she shared at her commencement this June. And I want you to know I do this humbly—this isn’t a braggart kind of thing. This is about listening and learning from those who are younger and who can teach us important truths. Hear this: [video shown of commencement speech by Kiersti Phenow]

We can’t go over it. We can’t go under it. Oh no...we’ve got to go through it. I remember that line from a catchy story my parents used to read to me when I was a kid. It was called “We’re Going on a Bear Hunt”, and although I was never particularly fond of the idea of trapping the Charmin Ultra bear, to this day I have not forgotten those wise words. The story spoke of navigating through the tall grass and murky waters of the terrain, yet left me with my only option: to go straight through it—it’s hardest and most daunting parts. Now although that phrase feels elementary, and honestly it’s at the reading level that I prefer, it reveals a deeper theme that has been pertinent in my four years here at Bethel. If I’m honest with you, these have undoubtedly been the hardest years of my life. I arrived at Bethel after a gap year in South Africa, passionately eager to learn. I jumped headfirst into reconciliation classes, glued to my seat, as mentors like Dr. Curtiss DeYoung and Dr. Christena Cleveland tenderly ushered me into a world of reconciliation and justice that would transform every part of my life. As I listened to stories of hard truths, I was confronted with a choice—like people of privilege are—to either actively ignore the reality of systemic injustice in our world, going over and under the overt call to radically love my neighbor as myself, subsequently silencing the voice of the beloved around me. Or, I could choose to disrupt my comfort and lean into the tension of discovering the pervasiveness of a messy painful system that has oppressed people for centuries—the same powers that Jesus himself spoke against. This called me into relationships and into work that would teach me to sit, to listen, to lament, and to resist. We cannot go over it; we cannot go under it. We must go straight through it. This is the hard and holy gospel work that we are commanded to engage. This fall I had felt the crushing weight of many years of going over and under some of my own internal untouched junk. To cope, I, like many other twenty-two year olds do in an existential crisis, went out and bought a Crock-Pot. But when the Crock-Pot didn’t tend to the needs of my deepest internal crisis, Dr. Claudia May, the fiercest, most powerful, godly woman I know, sought me out in my darkest place. She tenderly looked in my eyes and told me that it was now my season, my time to get to work on my own healing with the help of others. I will never forget how she spoke, telling me that I had to believe I was ultimately worthy enough to go straight through it. To enter the terrifying, messy, hard

journey where I was to curiously and compassionately befriend myself, doing the hard soul work to discover, honor, and celebrate the Creator's fingerprints all over the unapologetically powerful woman I was crafted to be. I am continually tempted to go over and under the hard things, knowing full well that it will not sustain me because it's a lonely journey where you miss out on what is real and true. I choose to go through because I think of my fierce and resilient community here, people who have guided me and held me—hot freakin' mess and all—through the hardest parts of it. Dr. Cornell West, an activist and prominent leader in the struggle for liberation summed it up best by saying, "I am who I am because somebody loved me, and this is the love that has made me stay in it." See, I'm not convinced that going straight through is about the active pursuit for what waits on the other side, but it's the challenge to be fully present, intimately engaging all the depths around you. It is here that we are most vulnerable. It is here where it is hardest, yet most vibrantly beautiful. It is here that we are militantly tender and unapologetically joyful. It is here that we dance with the divine. It is here that we are asked to listen hard and well to those around us, and listen to the whispers of our own soul. It is here that we cling tight to one another; that we realize that none of us are free until we are all free. It is here where we believe another world is possible, and it is here that we are called.

[Rich Phenow speaks again]

We have to go through the forest, through the troubled waters. We need to be bridge builders, people who do the hard work of reconciliation, who do the hard work of seeing our part in oppressing others. We need to do the hard work of being respectful, for whatever we say or do, we have to do it in the name of Jesus as Christ followers. Let me lead us in a confession for our sins. When I say, "the people say", your response will be, "Oh Lord, only You can make all things new".

Lord Jesus, Your kingdom is good news for a world caught in racial hostility. We ask that You would give us grace for the deep challenges facing our country. We confess our anger and our deep sadness and our corruptive sense of weakness, to see this world healed through our own strength. And God's people said:

Congregational response: Oh Lord, only You can make all things new.

Lord, we honestly confess that our country has a long history of racial oppression. That racism has been a strategy of evil powers and principalities, so Lord we confess that the gospel is good news. Good news for the oppressed and the oppressor, for both are raised up. Both are liberated, but in different ways. The oppressed are raised up for the harsh burden of inferiority, and the oppressor from the destructive illusion of superiority. And so our response is:

Congregational response: Oh Lord, only You can make all things new.

Lord, we confess that the gospel is Your power to form a new people not identified by dominance or superiority, but by unity in Your spirit. So Lord, we

humbly ask that You would help us name our part in this story of racial oppression and hostility, whether we have sinned against others by seeing them as inferior or whether we have been silent in the face of evil, forgive our sin. And God's people say:

Congregational response: Oh Lord, only You can make all things new.

And so Lord, we commit our lives to You, believing that You are working in this world in spite of destructive powers and principalities. We pray that this day You would bring healing to those who are hurt, peace to those who are anxious, and love to those who are fearful. We wait for You oh Lord, so make haste to help us. And it's in Your holy name that we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*