

## *What Do We Say to Children?*

By Rev. Joe Connolly

“Let these words that I command today / be written in your heart. / Recite them, teach them diligently to your children....” — Deuteronomy 6:6-7a.

Newspaper articles and Facebook postings made many aware the interfaith community gathered at the Chenango County Courthouse steps on Thursday last to offer a vigil for peace. At the vigil we tried to address the current violence against different groups and, therefore, stand against hate.

I am sure many would say: the opposite of hate is love, is it not? And we are all for love? Are we not? So organizing a gathering against hate was a given.

However, that misses the point. The opposite of hate is not love. The opposite of hate is apathy. That is why we needed to gather, needed to take action, the action of shining a light on love which is neither apathetic nor indifferent. Love, itself, is an action.

Members of this church were present. But for those who were not let me offer a précis of how it unfolded— or at least what I remember. A caveat: some who were there may have different details or impressions. This is just my experience. (Slight pause.)

One count put the number of souls assembled at more than 100. At the beginning we heard the steeple bell of this church peal 13 times.

Dr. Tom Holmes started by referring to recent violence. 11 people were murdered while worshiping at a synagogue in Pittsburgh and two African-Americans died in Tennessee while shopping, murdered because of their race.

We were gathered, Tom said, to honor those who died in acts which were clearly hate crimes, American citizens murdered because they were Jewish or African-American. Ken Warner from the Norwich Jewish Center then read the names of the 13 who died.

Ken also recited the *Kaddish*, the prayer said as part of mourning rituals in the Jewish tradition. There was silence and then Mary Williams rang a handbell 13 times.

Susan Fertig from the Norwich Jewish Center offered context. She recalled how 2 ships carrying Jews seeking asylum, seeking safety, were turned away from our shores just before and during WWII. Many who were refused entry wound up in concentration camps.

Sue spoke of personal history, of relatives who both did not survive the holocaust or lived through it. She spoke about the desecration of the Jewish Center here in Norwich several years ago. The building has still not been totally restored.

Next the Rev. Rachel Morse of Broad Street United Methodist Church read Psalm 5 from the translation known as *The Message*. Verses 4, 5 and 6 read: “God, You do not socialize with Wicked, / invite Evil over as Your houseguest. / Hot-Air-Boasters collapse in front of You; / You shake Your head over Mischief-Makers. / God destroys Lie-Speakers; / Blood-Thirsty, Truth-Benders disgust You.” And verse 11 says, “...You, O God, welcome us with open arms / when we run to You for cover.” (Slight pause.)

The Rev. Dr. David Spiegel of the First Baptist Church then spoke with passion. David was raised in his mother's Christian tradition but his father was Jewish. His father, a World War II hero, acted as the personal body guard of General Dwight David Eisenhower.

After the war David's father tried to join the Jersey State troopers. You can't do that, he was told. You're Jewish, too weak. You'll run when there's danger. Eventually David's father became the chief, the commanding officer, of the Jersey State Police.

David's Dad always impressed on him prejudice was going to be a part of his life. Indeed, when David attended a Christian College in Iowa, since he had name often associated with a Jewish heritage, people asked him why he wanted to go to a Christian school. David's message to us was clear: marginalization, hate, bigotry have no place.

I was next. I offered some history. I said marginalizing groups and inciting has been around for many, many millennia. In 1949— more recent but still a long time ago— Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the musical *South Pacific*.

In this work the song *You've Got to Be Carefully Taught* is sung by Marine Lieutenant Joe Cable who is in an interracial relationship. He insists racism is "not born in you! It happens after you're born..." Cable then sings these words.

"You've got to be taught to hate and fear. / You've got to be taught from year to year / It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear. / You've got to be carefully taught. / You've got to be taught to be afraid / Of people whose eyes are oddly made / And people whose skin is a different shade / You've got to be carefully taught. / You've got to be taught before it's too late / Before you are six or seven or eight / To hate all the people your relatives hate / You've got to be carefully taught."

Then I said let us, together, understand we must not marginalize, we must not teach hate. Let us understand we must teach love and respect. When we teach love and respect and when we learn love and respect, this will empower us all to be truly free. At that point I offered a Benediction. I will use those words at the end of this service today.

A number of people told me they were moved by this event, moved by its simplicity, its sentiments, its honesty, its attempt at shining a light when light is sorely needed. I take no individual credit for that. I was part of a team. (Slight pause.)

This is what we hear in the work known as Deuteronomy: "Let these words that I command today / be written in your heart. / Recite them, teach them diligently to your children...." (Slight pause.)

We need to understand something about the instruction which tells us to teach our children. What are we invited to teach? (Quote:) "*Yahweh*, our God, *Yahweh* alone, is one. You are to love *Yahweh*, our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Slight pause.)

This should be obvious. We are invited to love. As I said earlier, love is an action. We are invited to teach. Teach is an action. Why was there a gathering Thursday last? Action was necessary. Action was imperative.

We live in a world where silence is not an option. It does not matter if you are an introvert and say, "Well, I can't say anything in public. That's not who I am."

You do not have to say a word. You can act. Actions speak louder than words. (Slight pause.)

In a couple minutes, in the time set aside for the Prayers of the People, we shall have a Litany of Remembrance. It might be argued these prayers are just words, not action, when action is required.

So let me address my experience with words which are prayers. Prayer centers us to be prepared to take action, to be active, centers us and thereby empowers us to understand God walks with us at all times, under all circumstances.

Which brings us back to action—the action called for by Deuteronomy—that we need to diligently teach the love of God to our children. I think a key question for us as a society is not ‘what are we teaching our children?’ We know we need to teach love. The key question is ‘how are we teaching our children?’

We need to teach our children with action. And yes, sometimes actions are words. Sometimes words are used to spread love of God and love of neighbor. And yes, sometimes words *are* used to spread violence and anger and hate.

Indeed, I said marginalizing groups and inciting have been around for millennia. So perhaps words *and* action have always been necessary. To be clear, I think many of us believe in our time silence is not viable option.

I do not think silence, at this time, is golden. I do realize right now there are many who are practicing silence, perhaps with the belief that violence, anger, fear will dissipate on its own or perhaps malice drives the silence. Again, silence is not an option. Silence is a display of apathy.

Let me quote holocaust survivor, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel on the topic of silence. (Quote:) “Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of race, religion or political views, that place must— at that moment— become the center of the universe.” [1]

So, how are we teaching our children? Do our words and our actions invite violence, anger, fear? Or do our words, our actions invite what Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, insisted were the two great commandments (quote:) “...love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength” and (quote:) “...love your neighbor as yourself.” (Slight pause.)

Love of God and love of neighbor are irrevocably intertwined with justice— God’s justice for all people. We must not remain silent as we seek God’s justice. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Earlier I said a number of people told me they were moved by the vigil, moved by its simplicity, its sentiments, its honesty, its attempt at shining a light when light is sorely needed. I hope for those who were not there my description helped you feel some of that. But descriptions are poor substitutes. Living through things, experiencing helps us understand ourselves, understand what life, what justice, what love is about. So to reiterate, silence is not an option. Action is necessary to help us understand ourselves, understand life, justice, love especially when teaching our children.”

BENEDICTION: Here now this blessing and this is the Blessing I used at the vigil for peace on Thursday: Go now— go in safety, for you cannot go where God is not. Go now— go with the purpose of fulfilling the will of God and God will honor your dedication. God now— go in freedom as we know God is the One Who sets us free from all that destroys. Go now— go in hope, for hope sees clearly the promise of God to walk with us. Go now— Go in love, for the love of God endures. Go now— go in peace for it is a gift of God to all people whose hearts and minds honor, respect and love. Amen.

[1] The Nobel Laureate speech of Elie Wiesel:

<http://eliewieselfoundation.org/elie-wiesel/nobelprizespeech/>