

All Kinds of Hunger  
Matthew 15:1-20

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I begin with a pastoral letter that came out this week from our conference ministers and officers of the United Church of Christ.

**Pastoral Letter**

Last weekend, a group of white supremacists came to Charlottesville, Virginia, and incited violence to protest the removal of a Confederate monument. Although protest is the bedrock of our nation's democracy, coming in riot gear proves that they intended to do more than simply protest.

We, the Council of Conference Ministers and Officers of the United Church of Christ, strongly condemn the acts of violent hatred expressed by these white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan members. Their white robes and burning crosses were replaced with polo shirts, khakis, and tiki torches, while their lynching was replaced with a speeding car barreling through a group of peaceful protesters with the intention of harming and killing others, which it did. Their vitriolic hatred is the same.

We confess that the events of Charlottesville are systemic and communal expressions of white privilege and racism that continues to pervade our nation's spiritual ethos. And if we only condemn the acts of August 12, 2017, without condemning the roots of racism, which perpetuate discrimination in our American schools, justice system, business, and healthcare systems, then we have sinned as well. We must work toward the Kin-dom of Heaven here on earth now for the sake of a just world for all.

We do this by committing to follow the ways of Jesus, who stood with the oppressed, spoke out against political and religious powers, and courageously embodied a just world for all as he sought to create it. Today, we must follow the ways of Jesus in addressing the hatred of white supremacists and racists among us.

Our local UCC churches must be true solidarity partners with those who march in the streets. Our UCC churches are encouraged to move from the sanctuary and walk alongside other clergy and community leaders who seek to resist, agitate, inform, and comfort. We must resist hatred and violence. We must also agitate ourselves, and our neighbors to acknowledge any racism within or among us. We must inform ourselves, and our neighbors what our sacred stories reveal to us of a just world for all. We must lament and grieve with those who are injured or murdered during violent confrontations with those who mean us harm. And we must comfort those who have been discriminated against with the transformative love of God.

As we go forward, let us model the legacy of activism through our sacred call given to us by our UCC ancestors: May we be prophetic truth-tellers like our Congregational Christian forebears, who marched in public squares demanding equality for all. May we serve others, and remain faithful witnesses like our Evangelical and Reformed forebears, who tended to the needs of the forgotten. And may we be courageous like our non-UCC forebears, who left their spiritual home and joined the UCC in order to fully live out who God created them to be.

In the days to come, may God's truth, mission, and courage be our guide to embodying the Kin-dom of Heaven here on earth.

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That marks the end of the pastoral letter. Now comes the time when we get to wrestle with what this letter and the events of recent days mean

for us. I'm going to back up a bit and do some scripture study. Stay with me—it does all connect.

Jesus modeled for us what a just world for all looks like. In Matthew 15, he takes on the scribes and Pharisees, who ask why he and his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat, as required by Jewish law. He says, If you're going to talk about Jewish law, let's talk about why you take the money that should go toward supporting your aging parents and tell them you're giving it to God instead. How does this financial sleight of hand create a just world for all? How does it honor your parents, as God commands? How does it put you in right relationship with God?

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that it's not washing your hands before eating that puts you in right relationship with God. It's not what goes into your mouth that makes you clean or unclean; it's what comes out. Because what comes out of your mouth comes from your heart, and if your heart is not clean, what comes out is evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander. This is what Jesus sees in the Pharisees when they make up rules and then call them doctrine. They are not living into a just world for all. Jesus dares to anger them by calling them out, by naming their lies in the light of day.

Throughout the rest of chapter 15 in Matthew, we see Jesus trying to live into a just world for all. But in one case he seems to forget himself, or maybe he's tired and just needs a break, because he is actually quite rude to a Canaanite woman who shouts without ceasing that she needs healing for her daughter, who is possessed by a demon. Jesus calls her a dog and says he doesn't have to help her. But she insists, and for once she convinces Jesus that she's right. He heals her daughter because of her great faith.

In the rest of this chapter, he heals many people and then, after three days with them on a mountain, he gets his disciples to feed the thousands once again with just a few loaves of bread and some fish. This is almost an exact repeat of the feeding of the thousands we talked about

a few weeks ago, yet the disciples do not seem to have learned anything, because they are just as stymied by this assignment as they were the first time. But Jesus takes their few loaves and fishes, blesses them, breaks them, and has the disciples distribute them. And thousands of people eat.

So apparently a just world for all means meeting people's hungers. Hunger for justice, hunger for healing, hunger to be heard, like the Canaanite woman, hunger to be fed food for the body. Jesus provides free health care, a free lunch, free education about God's love for all.

This is dangerous work, because it is so outside the normal hierarchical structures and rules. And we know where it led for Jesus. Still he persisted.

The Pharisees have an apparent hunger to be right, comfortable, secure, superior, first in line. Jesus calls them on this hunger, because it is not from God. They are centered not in building God's kin-dom but rather in building their own wealth and social standing. I suggest that their hunger to be right and superior comes not from love of God but from fear. And I suggest that there are similar motivations behind the actions of the alt right white supremacists. They are acting out of fear and hate, not out of love, and we need to name it for what it is.

We have choices. Last spring a few of us dipped our toe into the topic of white privilege. From recent events, we can see how white privilege and racism are alive and well and somehow feeling encouraged to step boldly onto center stage in recent months. No doubt some of the racists and Ku Klux Klan and alt-right people claim to be Christian. I hear Jesus' words saying it is what comes out of your mouth that makes you unclean, that knocks you out of right relationship with God. Like Jesus, we must dare to stand up to such evil.

Working for a just world for all takes many forms. Last week, there were three justice-oriented events happening on Sunday afternoon. One was a Days for Girls kit assembly work session, and a few from our church

were there, working to send feminine hygiene kits to parts of the world where girls do not have access to these supplies. Having these supplies means the difference between continuing their schooling and dropping out for good. Days for Girls is one part of a vision of a just world for all, because the longer girls stay in school, the better off their whole society is.

Another event last Sunday afternoon was a rally and march from Denny Park to downtown Seattle to demonstrate against the alt-right gathering at Westlake Park. During coffee hour, several of us were talking about whether we were going to go to this rally. Even after a sermon in which Peter steps out of the boat and Jesus is right there to fish him out of the water—even after that message that Jesus calls us to step out in faith with the knowledge that Jesus will be right there with us—I was nervous about that rally and march. Do I dare to step out? I also just wasn't in the mood for dealing with people spewing hate.

So I went to the third event, which was a barbecue at Idriss Mosque up near Northgate. This is the mosque's effort to meet its neighbors, to help people understand that Islam is not the enemy, that we are more alike than different. This, too, is one part of a vision of a just world for all. It was great. I wrote about it in the September newsletter.

But let's go back to the counterprotests for a moment, because they are important. Yesterday in Boston the counterprotestors outnumbered the white supremacists, who went home early. God bless those who show up with a message of love and peace in the face of such hatred. Standing up in love is a part of a vision of a just world for all. When we dare to step out of the boat—when we dare to step out of our usual, comfortable, secure place of privilege—we have to know that, as scary as it is, Jesus is with us. Jesus is going to stand there alongside us, working for a just world for all.

In Matthew 15 we see Jesus giving multiple examples of what a just world looks like. He speaks truth to power in taking on the Pharisees. He

heals the sick—not just the Jews but also the Canaanite woman’s daughter. He teaches the disciples. He feeds the hungry. Not all of us can do all of those things. But all of us can do something. We can learn more about our white privilege, especially as we see this issue playing out in the news. We can write letters. We can make hygiene kits for girls so they can continue their education. We can meet our Muslim neighbors and learn more about Islam. This fall we will have an adult education series on Islam, and I hope that many of you can come. We can sing our hearts out with songs of justice and peace. And sometimes we can even show up at rallies and marches, risking confrontations with white supremacists. Scary. But Jesus will show up, too.

We live in a time of rapid change. The monuments that are starting to come down all over the country honor racism, slavery, and Jim Crow. It is time for those monuments to come down. It is time to say no to all of that. It is time to take Jesus’ hand and step out in faith. It is time to feed the hunger for justice and to build a just world for all.

We can’t do it alone. I recently saw the movie *War of the Planet of the Apes*. Not my usual movie-going fare, but I liked it a lot. The apes are oppressed, but they refuse to give up. They say, “We are stronger together.” That’s true for us, too. We are called to be builders of a just world for all. And we are stronger when we do it together. Come on. Jesus is waiting for us. Amen.