

This is not the sermon I was planning to preach today. The sermon I was planning to preach was around the theme of Imagining Church has a place where you can be honest about who you are without feeling shame or judgment. I was going to begin that sermon by telling a story about a short reflection I once heard a college kid give at a youth retreat. She was a counselor and she shared about how she struggled with feelings of inadequacy – feeling like she wasn't enough or that she had to do more to be worthy of love. In her journey she discovered a prayer that was profoundly helpful to her. Since then it has become profoundly helpful to me and a prayer I say every day. It's simply this: "God help me to see myself just as I am, nothing more and nothing less."

The idea is we don't have to try to be more than we are to think we are worthy of love and, on the flip side, we should never try to puff ourselves up so that we might look down on others. May we see ourselves just as we are...nothing more and nothing less.

That was going to be my sermon, but the assassination attempt of former President Trump changed what I think I need to say and what I think we need to hear today. Whenever jarring events happen, there's a tension about what to say or when to say anything in church because on the one hand we don't want to just preach the news cycle. My guess is some of you come here because you need respite from the news cycle. But on the other hand, we are not called to bury our heads in the sand. One of our core priorities is to engage the world around us.

How can we let our faith inform how we respond to what's happening in the world?

How can we stay true to our values no matter what is happening?

And how can we relentlessly cling to hope, trusting that time and time again God has journeyed alongside people going through hard times.

So with that in mind, I want to offer these words and I'll begin with a true story.

Ria Du Toit is a South African mother who suffered the most unimaginable tragedy possible. In 1993, her oldest daughter Amanda stabbed to death her youngest daughter Cisca. Amanda was 17 years old. Cisca was 13. At the funeral for Cisca, her mother Ria wept with all the love a mother has. And at the sentencing for Amanda, Ria was there also, weeping for Amanda with all the love a mother has. The love and grief she felt for Cisca did not stop Amanda from being her daughter. Ria never stopped loving Amanda...even when she ripped her heart out. Because that's what you do when you're a parent.

I don't think I truly understood what unconditional love means until I became a parent. But I know that there is nothing my kids could ever do that would make me stop loving them...that would make me reject them as my kids. While almost all of us are spared the turmoil of what Ria Du Toit went through, my guess is that we can relate to the unconditional nature of her love for her children.

So while we are spared from that experience, God is not. Our Scripture this morning is the bedrock foundation of my theology. Every single human is created in the Image of God. Every

single human is a child of God. And nothing changes that. Nothing changes the unconditional nature of God's love for all of God's children. So when one of God's children suffers unbelievable pain, God loves them with all the love a parent has. And when one of God's children inflicts unbearable pain on another, God still loves them with all the love a parent has.

At the same time, God weeps with the one who suffers and God weeps for the one who caused the suffering. In God's eyes, all violence is family violence. All violence is committed by and against someone who is a part of God's family.

That must be our lens for how we see the events of yesterday.

First, there is no place for political violence...full stop...period. We must remember that the moment we think it's ok to use violence for political purposes, we are condoning violence against a child of God, against someone in God's family, and by extension, someone in our family. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, he responded that, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." And Martin Luther King Jr. taught us that violence leads to more violence. We are called to be people of peace and so we must condemn any act of political violence whether it's perpetrated against those we support or against those we oppose.

Secondly, everyone at the rally in Pennsylvania yesterday has experienced a traumatic event. Children of God experienced a traumatic event. As a congregation that is committed to talking about things like mental health challenges, like trauma, our first response towards everyone at that rally must be compassion. Trauma does not differentiate between political parties but affects everyone who has lived through a traumatic event. So may we offer our love and prayers for everyone at the rally yesterday.

Thirdly, this was, by all appearances, a targeted act of violence against Donald Trump. Donald Trump is one of the most divisive figures of my lifetime. There are people who feel he has given them a voice like no politician has before. And there are people who believe that he and the MAGA movement are an existential threat to our very democracy. The events of yesterday don't change those feelings for most of us I imagine. But what I hope we can do is humanize him. No matter what you or I may feel about him, Donald Trump is a child of God. Donald Trump is an Image of God. That is the bedrock foundation of our faith – every single person is a child of God. So may we offer our prayers for healing and safety for Donald Trump and his family.

Finally, as I said earlier, violence leads to more violence. And I fear that while it seems that the gunman acted alone, this act might motivate others who would lash out in violence. And the first step towards justifying violence is dehumanization. Friends, more than ever, may we cling to the truth our Scripture writer May we relentlessly claim the full humanity of every single person, especially those who have been and are being demonized – whether they are people with red MAGA hats at a rally in Pennsylvania or Haitian refugees looking for a safe place to start over, or trans kids being bullied, or rural white men who feel the economy has left them behind, or people of color who are terrified every time a police officer pulls them over, or election workers who fear they may be attacked for just doing their jobs, or anyone else. May we never, ever see anyone as less than human and may we tirelessly work to defend the dignity and worth of all people, even, and maybe especially those who we might see as our enemies.

I think perhaps Jesus' hardest teaching was, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." What I find so interesting in this teaching is the two-part nature. Love your enemies ...AND...pray for your enemies.

I find it interesting because I'm not sure I can will myself to love someone. But I can will myself to pray for them. And the more we pray, the harder it is to hate. The more we pray for someone, the harder it is to dehumanize them. The more we pray for someone, the more we are changed, the more our hearts are softened, the more we become people of love, of compassion, of forgiveness, the more we become like Jesus.

And so friends, on this day, as it is filled with so many emotions, so much fear, so much that seems to overwhelm us. As we wonder if our nation can ever find healing from the wounds that so deeply divide us, may we remember the words of a Hebrew poet thousands of years ago that no matter what is going on around us, "every person is the Image of God. Every person is a child of God. Every person is our family." And may we remember the life and teachings of Jesus who loved and welcomed all, who forgave even those who killed him, and who dared to believe in us so much that he thought we might be able to follow in his footsteps and love like he loved, forgive like he forgave.

I don't know what is going to happen in the days and weeks ahead, but I do know what I hope. I hope that the people of First Congregational and East Congregational Church will do all we can to lean into love, to look for our common humanity, and to relentlessly cling to hope...no matter what.

I want to offer a prayer for us and then Matthew is going to play a little music to give us a time to center and meditate.

So let us pray:

O God, help us.

Too often we believe that the things that divide us are stronger than the things that connect us.

Too often we jump from disagreement to conflict.

Too often we fail to see those with whom we disagree as children of God.

Remind us of who we are and who you call us to be.

Remind us that you love every single person no matter where they live, the color of their skin, who they love, or, yes, who they vote for.

So God, with this in mind, we pray for Donald Trump and his family. We pray for healing and safety for all of them. We pray for all those who attended the rally yesterday, some of whom will likely experience the lingering effects of trauma for years. Bring them comfort and peace. We

pray especially for those who were critically injured that they would recover and for the family of the person who was killed. Be with them in their grief. We pray for the family and friends of the gunman – Thomas Matthew Crooks, only 20 years old, who was killed after he fired shots. We pray for all those who will likely be victims of violence or further discriminatory acts because of what happened yesterday. May they find communities of welcome and safety. And we pray for our nation that somehow, we can learn to live together in peace, that somehow we will turn towards unity rather than division. And we pray for our two churches and for each other. Many of us are worried and scared about the future of our nation. Many of us feel overwhelmed. When we don't know what to do, help us to remember that we can always be people who relentlessly cling to hope, who lean into love, who are quick to forgive, and who will do our part to build a community and nation of peace.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.