

APRIL 21
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love
overcomes
hate



Rev. Phil Haslanger

TRANSFORMATIVE
COMMUNITY

Sunday, April 21, 2024 | **Transformative Community**
“Love Overcomes Hate” | Acts 9:1-22 | Rev. Phil Haslanger

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, who sent you Word to live among us. Amen.

Two days ago, I was standing at the spot of the deadliest attack on any Jewish community in the United States.

I was at the [Tree of Life Synagogue](#) in Pittsburgh. On the morning of Oct. 27, 2018, the killer – a 46-year-old man steeped in the hatred of Jews and Muslims and immigrants – entered the synagogue where three services were underway for the three separate congregations that used the building. [Over the next 20 minutes, using an AR-15 rifle and three Glock .357 semi-automatic pistols, he killed 11 people and wounded seven more.](#) Four of those killed were Holocaust survivors.

That morning, as the news started to come in on my phone, I was standing outside the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where in 1963 a bomb set by hate-filled people killed four young girls – three 14-year-olds and an 11-year-old – as they were getting ready for the Sunday services.

I walked across the street to a park, where there is a memorial to Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl from Germany and then Amsterdam who kept a diary that so many have read. She died in a concentration camp in 1945.

Hatred, all around. Probably a good time to pause and a deep breath.

The story of Paul – then called Saul – that we just heard starts out as a story of hatred. He was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” the writer of the Acts of the Apostles tells us.

Saul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus.

He was looking for people who “belonged to the Way” – followers of Jesus – so that he could bring them bound back to Jerusalem.

He was the one who held the coats for those who stoned an early follower of Jesus, a deacon named Stephen, to death.

He was a Pharisee, one of those who held firmly to Jewish law and the place of the Temple in their lives. They saw these Jesus followers as disloyal, as rivals, as troublemakers. A young man, probably in his 20s, Saul wanted to win the favor of his group, so he went after the Jesus followers with what he himself called zeal.

It would not be too strong to say that Saul hated these followers of the Way. Until something happened. We heard the story of the vision on the road, the temporary blindness, surely the confusion he felt as his companions led him into Damascus.

Here's one way to think about this. Suddenly, hatred encountered love - and love won.

It actually happens sometimes.

In November 2008, just a few days after the nation elected Barack Obama to be president, a group of former heads of the Ku Klux Klan and prominent neo-Nazis met secretly in a hotel room in Memphis. One of the stars of the gathering was a 19-year-old named Derek Black, a student at the New College of Florida and radio show host. His father, Don Black, had created Stormfront, the Internet’s largest white nationalist site. His godfather was David Duke, the former grand wizard of the KKK, who once had been married to his mother.

Young Derek told the crowd at that hotel, “The great intellectual move to save white people started today.”

At college, as other students realized he was an ardent white supremacist, they began to isolate Derek. And he isolated himself. Until he got an invitation from a student name Matthew Stevenson: “What are you doing Friday night?”

Matthew was an Orthodox Jew – the only one at the college – so he began hosting small Shabbat dinners at his apartment. His guests were eclectic – Christians, atheists, Blacks, Hispanics. And now he was inviting the rising star of white supremacy to join them.

[The Washington Post had a story about Derek and Matthew.](#) It said: “Matthew decided his best chance to affect Derek’s thinking was not to ignore him or confront him, but simply to include him. ‘Maybe he’d never spent time with a Jewish person before,’ Matthew remembered thinking.”

Author Eli Saslow wrote that Matthew did this hoping that just by spending more and more time with his group, Derek would be able “to begin seeing past the stereotypes to the people and to the humanity.”

Derek went once. Then again. And again. A friendship began to form despite their suspicions of each other. A few other Jewish students from town joined the dinners. Derek’s views began to soften. Slowly...but steadily.

Remember, he was a very public figure in the white nationalist movement, as was his family, so imagine the shockwaves when he posted a very public statement that included with these words: “The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I am sorry for the damage done.”

As Rabbi Sharon Brous wrote about the Jewish students in her new book, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*, “What did it take for them to open their homes, week after week, to engage in the painstaking work of stretching open another person’s heart, of humanizing themselves to a neo-Nazi, and even finding humanity in him?”

Love had pushed out hate.

Closer to home, many of you may remember the awful shooting at the Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek near Milwaukee in 2012 when a white supremacist entered the worship building on a Sunday morning and fatally shot six members of the congregation and wounding four others before killing himself.

One of those killed was Satwant Singh Kaleka, the president of the gurdwara, who died trying to protect the congregation. His son, Pardeep Kaleka – who you see in this picture - wanted to know what could drive someone to that level of hatred. He connected with Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist who had grown up in Mequon.

Arno had joined the white power movement when he was 16, coming out of a dysfunctional home, living with alcoholism, reveling in violence.

He was a founding member of what became the largest racist skinhead organization in the world.

He described himself as a reverend in a self-declared Racial Holy War. He played in a white power rock band.

He attacked anyone who was Black, Jewish and LGBTQ – anyone who wasn't white or straight.

But then he began to encounter people who shook up his view of the world. He had a swastika tattooed on the middle finger of his right hand.

He later wrote: "One time I was greeted by a black lady at a McDonald's cash register with a smile as warm and unconditional as the sun. When she noticed the swastika tattoo on my finger, she said: 'You're a better person than that. I know that's not who you are.' Powerless against such compassion, I fled from her steady smile and authentic presence, never to return to that McDonald's again."

Other things happened. His boss – who was Jewish – did not fire him despite the swastika on his jacket. A Black coworker offered him half of his sandwich when Arno didn't bring lunch. A lesbian supervisor treated him with unexpected kindness.

His love of music led him to the rave scene, where he found himself dancing with people of different races. They accepted him. And then he became a father. He watched his little girl at day care play with delight with a diverse group of children.

It took time, but Arno had rejected white supremacy by the time he met Pardeep. They did not bond right away, of course. But soon they were speaking together to groups, writing a book together called [*The Gift of Our Wounds: A Sikh and a Former White Supremacist Find Forgiveness After Hate.*](#)

Love had once again overcome hate.

Now let's join Ananias in Damascus.

You could hear his anxiety about going to visit this zeal-filled persecutor of the

followers of Jesus at a home on Straight Street. In his words: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

But Ananias took the message from Jesus to heart and went to see Saul, to bless him, to baptize him, to teach him about the Way of Jesus.

God’s love transformed Saul. Ananias willingness to reach out and embrace Saul transformed the life of those early Christians.

I don’t want to be too simplistic about all of this. Evil does exist in our world. Evil killed people in the synagogue in Pittsburgh, in the gurdwara in Oak Creek, in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Evil killed people in Israel on Oct. 7 and has killed so many in Gaza since then.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia are surging in our nation right now.

Remember that memorial to Anne Frank in the park in Birmingham? It has these words from 15-year-old Anne’s diary on March 16, 1944 – five months before the Nazis would capture her and her family: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

You and I may not be able to stop all the evil in our world. But maybe we can help transform one life and then another and then another if we open ourselves to those who seemed troubled and offer them another path. And if we can’t do that, we can at least find ways to stand with those who are suffering.

Let me go back to the people I met in Pittsburgh on Friday, six years after hate blasted its way through their house of worship.

Peg Durachko’s husband, Rich Gottfried, was murdered at the synagogue. She said, “It was an evil attack on a sacred place, an attack from evil on goodness.”

But part of the healing process for her and the other victim’s families includes creating a new space to try to uproot antisemitism.

Michael Bernstein – who happens to be a UW-Madison philosophy grad – now chairs the [Remember. Rebuild. Renew.](#) campaign to create an international institution dedicated to ending antisemitism through education, engagement and action. It will be on this site next to the sanctuary of the original synagogue.

And others in Pittsburgh talked about the importance of all those who surrounded them with love and care and support in the wake of that day's tragedy. On the fence along the spot where older buildings of the synagogue once stood are 101 pieces of art submitted by student artists from across the nation in what was called the [Hearts Together](#) project.

You get a glimpse of it here. But take a closer look at this one.

"You're not alone." This came from a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida – the site of another mass shooting. The note with it says, "We are here for you."

So even if we cannot always stop evil and hatred and violence, even if we cannot be Ananias for Paul or Matthew Stevenson for Derek or Pardeep for Arno, we can still reach out to those who suffer from such tragedies. It really matters.

[Suzanne Shreiber](#), a past president of the Tree of Life Synagogue, said that in the days after their tragedy, "the city was leaning in, standing beside us, taking a breath with us."

When Saul was rampaging against the early Christians, they leaned in, stood together, breathed together. When Ananias helped Saul live into his new call of love, that led to new communities where love defined their existence.

So today, the challenge for us remains – how can we help love overcome hate? How can we make God's love a reality? What can we take out from this sanctuary this morning?

As Anne Frank wrote, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Amen.