

Sermon: Only Love
Text: Genesis 12
Date: July 10, 2016
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go . . .'

Genesis 12:1a

When I woke up this past Monday morning I knew exactly what I wanted to do from this pulpit today. Mostly I simply wanted to tell a story.

Given that our current summer sermon series is focused on the big stories of the Old Testament, I thought it would be fun to reimagine and retell one of these stories -- in this case, the story of Abram's call--from a first person narrative point of view. It would be a kind of original story about an ancient story, as it were, a little bit like I sometimes do the Sunday after Christmas.

But then on Tuesday morning we woke to the news that Alton Sterling, a 37-year old African American man, was shot and killed by a police officer while selling CD's outside a convenience store in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The news immediately recalled the 2014 death of Eric Garner on Staten Island, who was selling cigarettes on the street when the police wrestled him to the ground and, yes, killed him.

And the death of Michael Brown after that and of Tamir Rice after that and of Trayvon Martin whose death in 2012 first opened the eyes of white America to the fact innocent black men could be killed and the parties who killed them not be held accountable.

Like these other young men, it appears that Mr. Sterling's principle crime was that he was black. Was he carrying a gun? Let's say he was. Was he brandishing it. No, he was not. Not according to the video footage of the shooting, anyway.

In this respect Mr. Sterling was not different from thousands of white people who freely walk around America's streets and neighborhoods every day, carrying concealed – and sometimes not so concealed – weapons, like it's their birthright, like walking into Applebee's with an AR-15 assault rifle strapped across your shoulder is a normal thing to do in a "civilized" country.

The only difference, of course, is that when it comes to people who look like me, the police typically don't first taser us for selling CDs or cigarettes, then pin our arms and legs down and shoot us multiple times in the chest from point blank range, or strangle us in a fatal choke hold.

As has happened in other, similar cases, the horrific incident in Baton Rouge was captured on video and posted online, where it instantly went viral.

As has happened in other, similar cases, protests and vigils immediately broke out. And as part of this now familiar cycle, Mr. Sterling's family went on television, his wife voicing her pain and outrage while his 15 year old son sobbed and shook with grief beside her.

And that was just the start of this week from hell.

Late Thursday night, even as the protests of Alton Sterling's death continued across the country, Philando Castile, a hard-working, well-liked cafeteria worker was driving home after his shift at the school in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he worked. With him in his car were his fiancé and her four-year old daughter, who was sitting in the back seat.

As you have likely read by now, the trouble started when local police pulled Mr. Castile over for a broken taillight. Funnily enough, I've just learned that one of my taillights is out. It would never occur to me that this minor electrical problem on my Subaru would be sufficient cause to put my life at risk.

But then I'm not a black man.

In this case Mr. Castile informed the presiding officer that he was in fact carrying a firearm—because who isn't carrying a weapon these days? Seems like we've reached the point in the land of the free and the home of the brave where handguns are about as common as cell phones.

Understandably Mr. Castile wanted the officer to know this information before he reached for his wallet to retrieve his license, as the officer had instructed him to do.

But evidently straightforward English words sometimes mean something different to a white police officer when they are uttered by an African American man. Because when Philando Castile reached for his wallet, the officer shot him not once, not twice, not even three times.

The officer shot Mr. Castile four times. In front of his fiancé and her four-year old daughter. We know this because, once again, the incident, or at least the aftermath of the incident, was caught on video, in this case by Mr. Castile's fiancé.

"You shot four bullets into him, sir," she says incredulously, to the same officer when he tells her to keep her own hands visible.

Once again the cycle repeats. The video is posted online and it immediately goes viral, even though it is almost unbearable to watch.

News of the shooting spreads like wildfire, even though it is almost unbearable to hear. Spontaneous vigils break out and formal protests are quickly organized, one in front of the governor's mansion in St. Paul, others around the country as the news spreads.

Which leads to yet another shooting and still more heartbreak. At an otherwise peaceful protest in Dallas, shots suddenly ring out, only this time the end result is different.

This time the victims are not young black men. This time the victims are Dallas police officers. Ironically they had been deployed to keep the protesters safe, only to be gunned down themselves by a sniper with –and do I even need to say this? – a semi-automatic rifle.

So by week's end five uniformed police officers are lying dead in America's streets, along with the two young black men who preceded them in violent death earlier in the week.

So the short of it is, you wake up and for the third time in four days you think, *How long O Lord?*

Then you remember that just last month fifty innocent civilians were mowed down in a nightclub in Orlando in a heinous hate crime and you think, *What has happened to my country? Will there never be an end to this senseless violence?*

Or maybe that's not what you think. Or not only what you think. Maybe you also think, *Who is to blame for this? Where can I vent my sorrow and at whom can I direct my outrage?*

Well, this sanctuary is an appropriate venue for expressing our sorrow. And in just a few minutes we will create space in our service to do just that.

As for an appropriate target for your outrage, there certainly are plenty of candidates.

The NRA for its pathological and relentless drive to turn the handgun into a sacrament, to turn assault rifles into false gods which we bow down to in awestruck veneration right before they are used to kill innocent school children sitting at their desks, or innocent movie-goers gathering to watch a summer blockbuster, or innocent church-goers, sitting in their pews at church during Wednesday night prayer meeting.

Or Congress for its cowardice in standing up to the NRA, for its maddening unwillingness to do what they have been elected to do, namely, to do something, anything, to curb the cancerous spread of gun violence in this country, to do something, anything, to make our country saner and more peaceful and more just, which is to say, more like every other developed country on earth.

But now that this train is rolling, let's not stop there.

How about out of control, blatantly racist police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and St. Paul, Minnesota?

We all know perfectly well that the vast majority of police officers in this country are good, upstanding men and women, and we are enormously grateful for their service and the sacrifices they make to keep us all safe. Yet we also can't help but wonder, *Why does this keep happening, over and over and over again?*

Or how about Rush Limbaugh and his ilk for labeling the Black Lives Matter protestors “terrorists”, as if having the audacity to insist that black people are human beings is on a par with wearing a suicide vest into a crowded city market and blowing up innocent civilians. Absolutely shameful.

And now, following Dallas, it appears we have to add to this list at least one enraged African American man who finally reached his limit and, like any number of vigilantes before him, took justice, as he perceived it anyway, into his own hands.

It’s tempting, isn’t it, to locate the blame on any or all of these parties. Tempting and, let’s admit it, a little satisfying. It feels good to point our anger and these various parties and then pull the trigger. *Bang.*

But what if this list is incomplete? What if I, too, am partly to blame? And by that I mean me. Steve Runholt. And what if you are partly to blame? And what if all of us together are partly to blame?

That’s a hard thing to say and a hard thing to hear. And I’m going to let Emily Patka explain what I mean by that. Not because I’m afraid to try—this is no Sunday to give into fear—but simply because she has explained it perfectly. In a brief letter to the NY Times she writes:

To all white people who are offended at being lumped in with whiteness as a whole: this is not about you as an individual. This is about you as a member of a privileged class.

Whether you want this privilege or not, you have it and you benefit from it. No matter how progressive you are, no matter how many black friends, no matter how much you speak up or fight back, you will always have it as long as systemic racism exists.

It’s not about you. Think outside yourself. We won’t undo these systems of oppression until we acknowledge our part in it. And we all have a part in it, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

I’ve never met Emily Patka and frankly I resent having to admit this, but deep in my heart I know she’s right. And here’s how I know:

Because I can drive my car anywhere I want with a broken taillight and not have to spend one second worrying about whether I might die at the hands of the police because of it.

And until we reach a point in this country where a broken taillight means the same thing for Philando Castile as it does for me, I am benefiting from my privilege. I am living in a land of gross injustice and my indifference to this injustice aids and abets the system that keeps me safe, day and night, even as it puts black lives at risk during traffic stops.

If you're not convinced, here's an example from closer to home. I have never, not one time, not ever, been stopped by the police while leaving the development where Robyn and I live, and then questioned about what I'm doing in this area.

My dear friend Rodney Lytle is not so lucky. Ask him if he has ever been stopped by the Highway Patrol while leaving his home on College View Drive.

And ask him what they've asked him: about what he's doing in a neighborhood like this? Rodney is our neighbor, our friend and our brother. And he periodically gets stopped by the police for the crime of being black in the wrong place.

Still not convinced? Some of you will remember Tyrone Greenlee. Among many other noteworthy things, Tyrone is the director of Christians for a United Community, a non-profit in Asheville devoted to dismantling the root causes of racism. He has preached from this very pulpit.

On Thursday morning he posted the following message on FB:

A couple of days ago I was messaging with a friend in another state, talking about the police shooting in Deaverview. His first words to me after expressing shock over the incident were "how are you holding up?"

I realized-sometime after the conversation ended-that he was the first person of European descent to ask me that question-and it made me think-about how I am and where I am.

I am afraid-all the time-for my life-in my car, in my church, on the streets-and afraid for all those who look like me. I am in constant horror over how a traffic stop can become a life or death situation-the kind of traffic stop I endured a few months ago.

I am grieving-for my community, for this society, for the loss of life, for the families -across this nation and across town-who are engulfed in a sea of sorrow and pain at this very moment. I am worried-sick-about where this next presidential election will take us as a country.

And I am without answers-without strategy-without platitudes-right now, I am grieving-and traumatized. [I] just know-that I -we-as African Americans in America in July of 2016-need time-to grieve, mourn, lament, manage our anger, and do what we need to do to survive emotionally and psychologically day to day. That's how I'm holding up-if you're interested.

Like Tyrone, I, too, am without answers right now, but here's one thing I do know for sure: Finding answers and living into them is going to take us out of our comfort zones.

And I know this because that's always how God works.

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

You can perhaps imagine how excited Abram was to receive this call. He had happily settled with his family and his flocks in the land of Haran. Life is good in this land. Why would he want to go anywhere else?

The problem is his journey is not yet complete. Haran is not where he set out to go. Years before his father had gathered the whole family and announced they were leaving the land of Ur for the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey.

But Abram stopped half way there. And so the call comes, *Abram, Go! You're not home yet.*

I'm reminded of the story Leonard Pitts, the syndicated columnist, told at the MLK conference at Montreat last year.

When it comes to basic human and civil rights in this country, he said it's like we all got in our car in Miami, bound for Seattle. After many long hours of driving we finally made it to Kansas City and we decided that after all that time traveling, we're happy just to have made it this far. And so we stop.

Except half way home is not home. We're not called to settle in the land of Haran. We're called to travel to the land of Canaan, a land where justice flows down like waters, righteousness like a never ending stream, and God will not let us stop until we get there.

So here's what I'm going to do, personally. Tomorrow I'm meeting with Tyrone to talk about what I can do, and about what we might do together as a congregation, to support him and the members of the African American community as we make this journey together.

For once, I'm going to yield my privilege and let him steer the conversation. But if he asks me what I'm thinking, I'm going to tell him one idea I've already had: That we cancel service some Sunday and instead, we all go to worship at an African American church, maybe his church. Because if Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, why not start there?

If he like this idea, and he may not, and if Session approves it, and they may not, then we can give some thought to what this idea might actually look like.

For example, we might bring bowls of ashes to symbolize our sorrow. With the pastor's permission, we might place those ashes at a respectful distance from their Communion table to show that we repent of holding on to the privilege that keeps us safe while the children and young men in that congregation put their lives at risk every day, the moment they step out of their homes, or out of their church.

Or maybe we turn up instead with bowls of soup and platters of bread and steaming casserole dishes and place those in the kitchen in their fellowship hall.

And if our hosts want to invite us in to break bread with them, we can then sit down at table together and begin the work ahead of us. We can begin to talk and pray and grieve and heal together.

Because that's what love looks like. And here is the other thing I know for certain. It is only love that will save us. Not posting our outrage on Facebook. Not writing impassioned op/eds. Not joining protests or participating in vigils.

These are all good things to do, and I encourage you to do them. I may do some of them myself. But they will not save us. Only love has the power to do that.

I don't mean a passive, sentimental love. I mean incarnational love, the same love Jesus showed when he risked taking on human flesh to enter into the muck and mess of human life to be God with us and for us.

That is to say, a fearless love. A love that is willing to leave its comfort zones, to lay aside power and privilege and devote itself to tearing down the walls and the barriers that divide us.

That is the love that will save us because that is the kind of world we live in, filled with tragedy and sorrow.

As Dr. King reminded us, darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

Or as the great Lyn Manuel Miranda recently put it in a poem he wrote the morning after the Orlando shooting:

We chase the melodies that seem to find us until they're finished songs and [we] start to play / When senseless acts of tragedy remind us that nothing here is promised, not one day

And love is love, it cannot be killed or swept aside. / [And so it is left to us to] fill the world with music, love and pride.

For it is only love that will save us. Thanks be to God.