My father was a racist. I grew up hearing words that no child should ever hear - derogatory words for just about everyone who didn't look or talk like my father. I knew them all at an early age – nasty words for black people, for Mexicans, for Japanese and German people, for Italians and people of the Jewish faith. When I look back, I can piece together the reasons why my father was so racist – and so afraid of the other. He grew up in the mountains of West Virginia, dirt poor, about fifteen miles from the nearest town, which was smaller than Floyd. He went to a one-room schoolhouse with other children who lived near where he did. My father likely did not encounter another person who didn't look like his family or schoolmates until he went into the Army. During World War II, Daddy drove a tank in France. The things he saw and did haunted him until his death. He returned home bitter and angry at those who had threatened his life and had taken the lives of his comrades.

So, in as objective a way as I am able to look at it, I get why my father was the way he was. But no child can understand or distance themselves from a parent who spews such hate. It was a toxic environment in which to raise children. I easily could have turned out to be just like my father. But several things kept that from happening.

I grew up in southern California and went to a school that was predominantly white but had a lot of Mexican-American students. I grew to love the few things school taught me about the Mexican-American culture – enchilada and tamale days in the cafeteria, a celebration of the rich culture that was all around us. I was also lucky to have Mexican-American friends with whom I studied and played every day.

My best friend growing up was Sharon Takeda. Her parents had come to California from Japan after World War II. Only now can I begin to understand how difficult that must have been. Because both my parents worked, I went to the Takeda house after school most days, where I was exposed to the Japanese culture that permeated that household. The reasons why I never invited Sharon to my house were unspoken.

I take credit for none of the external factors that challenged what I heard at home. I had no control over where I grew up or the people who were put in my path. I also take no credit for the third – and most important – factor in my childhood journey out of my father's kind of racism: my mother. This is who my mother was: she was the “other,” in some ways. As an Englishwomen, Mom had a accent. She cooked strange foods and familiar ones strangely. Mom had such identity with her home country that she never became a U.S. citizen. This is what my mother did: she took my brother and me to Sunday School and church every Sunday. At that time, my mother didn't drive. She was a Catholic when she married; Catholics were another group my father hated, so Mom converted to my father's Lutheran faith and had him drop us off at church and pick us up each Sunday. He never came in.

My father loved my mother and he loved his children. I have no doubt about that. And we loved him. But I wonder if things would have been different for him – and us – if he would have stayed for worship even once.

Here is what we learned in church: that God created every single one of God's children. The way we are is intentional and holy. We learned that, as I heard one community leader say last week, under our different colors of skin, we all bleed red and are here to share one another's pain. We learned that it is Jesus' blood that saves us, that forgives our sins, our prejudices, our dangerous pride. We learned that God rejoices in each and every one of us, not despite our differences, but because of them. And we learned that in baptism, you and I are made new creations. That happens not just one time at the font. Every time God needs to remake and rework us, we are washed in that water and given new life, new opportunites and new tomorrows.

In our country, some of us have inherited a certain kind of privilege based solely on our skin color. This is the systemic racism that we often do not want to admit but that is nevertheless true. It is what gets us into certain neighborhoods and schools, what keeps us off police radar and causes some of us to stick to our own kind. It is only when we own this truth that we are able to open ourselves to live in a way that honors all people and allows us to share what we has been bestowed upon us, not by God, but by our culture, with those who look or speak or worship or live differently than we do.

Unchecked racism wreaked havoc in Charlottesville last weekend. There is no place in our country or in God's church for white supremacy, neo-Nazism or any notion of white superiority. Here is how the ELCA social statement, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture” puts it: *“Racism - a mix of power, privilege and prejudice – is sin, a violation of God's intention for humanity. The resulting racial, ethnic or cultural barriers deny the truth that all peple are God's creatures and, therefore, persons of dignity. Racism fractures and fragments both church and society.”* Christ's church has a unique message to share in these times of crisis, a message no one else can articulate. Again, from the social statement, adopted at the 1993 ELC churchwide assembly: *“[the church] must make confession for complicity, name the spiritual crisis at the roots, commit to change and make pledges to public witness, advocacy and action to confront racism.”*  Which is a wordy way of saying, “Why are we here if not for such a time as this?”

Our ELCA Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, has this to say to us: *“We recognize that the kind of violence we witnessed in Charlottesville last weekend is very real and affects all of us. We need to stand up firmly against racism and anti-Semitism, show up for and advocate with others. Jesus, who makes visible those who are invisible, is already there. We need to show up, and we need to listen in each of our communities.”*  Jesus is already where he calls us to be, in that good and pleasant place where kindred live together in unity. You and I are God's hands in this broken world. We are also God's voice. What comes out of our hearts turns into the words that can defile or build up, condemn or include, curse or bestow blessings.

I spoke about my childhood today not to make you think I'm a great person for overcoming my upbringing. I know that when some of you were growing up, you had similar experiences to mine. At times, my heart harbors the same kind of resentment and distrust of the other as anyone else's. But it also holds the love of God in Christ, as does yours. It is these better selves that we offer to God for the sake of the world.

You and I did not invent racism. But we can be the ones who stand up against it and begin to challenge it. We do this by teaching our children to respect, appreciate and love those who are different from them. Nelson Mandela, who spent almost three decades of his life in prison because of the color of his skin and his commitment to speaking the truth, remarkably wrote this, *“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”*

We don't know what lies ahead for us as a country, but we do know what is ahead for us as the body of Christ: a steadfast witness to God's love for all people and a commitment to open our hearts to what is already there.

I close with these words from the dean of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, who offers us an apt way to live as Christians in this country these days :   
"Pray with our lips. Pray with our hearts. Pray with our heads, our hands and our feet. Pray with our wallets and our smartphones. Pray with our t-shirts and our car bumpers. Pray with our pens and pencils and paints and lumps of clay. Pray with our drums and our keyboards and our strings and our voices. Pray with our library cards and book club nights. Pray with our cooking pots and baking sheets. Pray with our knitting needles and sewing machines. Pray as we wake and pray as we sleep. Pray. Pray. Pray."

Amen.

*Pentecost 11A*

*August 20, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 15: 20-28*