

Address, 2018 World Community Day
Church Women United
Mt. Zion Church
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Being an Ally, Owning Antisemitism, Creating Solidarity

I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. It is an honor to stand here in Mt. Zion Church with your congregations and to spend the morning with you in fellowship and community. I wrote the title of this talk last week – “Repairing a Broken World: Insights from Jewish Tradition” – and I thought that I would speak about texts from Jewish tradition that shape our understanding of a Jewish concept called *tikkun olam* or repair of the world.

Everything changed this past Saturday, and so I have decided to give a different talk. It was on that morning that Robert Bowers took an automatic rifle and entered Tree of Life synagogue, shooting Jews who had come to pray, killing 11 of them, injuring six of them, and traumatizing countless others. It was the deadliest attack against Jews in U.S. history.

It hit close to home for me. My partner and our children were at a different synagogue when they found out. The rabbi made an announcement during services. My children were terrified. A former classmate of mine lost a close friend in that shooting. Many of my colleagues were deeply connected to the community that was targeted.

The Pittsburgh synagogue shooting was not just an attack on Jews for who they were. It was also an attack on Jews for what they did. One of the congregations that met in this synagogue was active in refugee rights work. They had publicly listed their name on a website saying that they had celebrated “Refugee Shabbat,” which was a national program – celebrated here in Madison at all three of our synagogues and at Hillel on campus – that draws attention to the dire situation of refugees. It was organized by HIAS, which used to be known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and was founded in 1881 by Jews fleeing Russia and Eastern Europe. HIAS now primarily works to settle displaced people from around the world.

As Robert Bowers wrote on a far-right wing website, “Why hello there HIAS! You like to bring in hostile invaders to dwell among us? We appreciate the list of friends you have provided.” He then linked this to the web page that lists the 200 participating congregations.

As Christians who are truly committed to social justice, to repairing the world, as Jews would say, I think there are some important lessons that can be learned, and must be learned, about being an ally, and being in solidarity with one another.

So first, what does it mean to be an ally? It means to actively support members of another group, to stand beside them, to let them take the lead but to speak up when your voice needs to be heard. Being an ally means reaching out and forming strong connections with others, especially those who have less power than you do.

When someone is discriminated against or treated unjustly, we need others to stand up and to stand with us. It’s not just about being sympathetic, and it’s not just about believing in equality

as some abstract notion. It means being willing to act with and for others in order to end oppression and to create real equality.

It means being willing to educate ourselves about the experiences of other people – not just placing our assumptions upon them or expecting them to be our teachers. We must do our homework and learn what we do not know.

We must also challenge our own discomfort and deal with our own prejudices. We all carry assumptions about other people, and we must unlearn these prejudices. And then we must take action to create change.

What does it mean to take action? In the case of the Pittsburgh shooting, it means showing up. Many of our white Christian friends, African American friends, Latino friends, LGBTQ friends, and Muslim friends cared enough to reach out and show that they noticed, that they cared. They attended an interfaith vigil the night after the shooting. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Many people came because members of our community had already been cultivating these relationships long before the shooting. They stood by us as we mourned.

One of the transgender members of our community explained being an ally like this: An ally is not something you call yourself. An ally is something that others call you, when they see that you are standing with them. That night of the vigil, I had allies. This is what solidarity looks like.

But it didn't happen everywhere, and I'd like to illustrate this with a short story. After President Trump was elected, members of my community were devastated. Some of them wanted to reach out to Trump supporters to try to understand who they were and where they were coming from. They set up a series of dialogues with members of a church who voted for the president, and over the span of six months they met with each other.

After the Pittsburgh shooting what we heard was silence from our partners. Finally one of our members reached out to them to express her pain, to tell them how much she fears rising fascism, that she has considered leaving the country. One of their members responded by urging her not to blame President Trump. He ended his email by writing, "May God give you peace and allow you to understand that the actions of a single deranged individual is not representative of the majority of Americans who condemn the anti-Semitic attack in this Jewish house of worship!"

I'd like to share part of an email that I wrote in response to the group of church members we were in dialogue with:

Dear Friends,

In light of the Pittsburgh shooting, what I want to hear from my Christian friends are condolences. I want to know that you understand how deeply this has affected the Jewish community. I want you to recognize that many Jews no longer feel safe in this country.

It's not just that a deranged individual committed a heinous act. It's that our president, some of his advisors, and some members of Congress – people at the very highest levels

of leadership in this country – are condoning white supremacy. Their violent words lead to other people’s violent actions. Antisemitic hate crimes increased 57% in 2017. That’s not an unfortunate coincidence that parallels President Trump’s election. That’s the logical outcome of what happens when a president panders to white nationalists, circulates antisemitic tweets, and responds to the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville that was full of Nazi chants by saying, “there were some very bad people on both sides.” He has given a green light to violent, antisemitic, and racist hate groups.

While the majority of Americans do condemn the antisemitic attack on a synagogue, many Jews feel that their president does not care about our well-being.

I think many of us want to know that white Christians are ready to stand up for us and are ready to condemn antisemitism when they encounter it here in Madison.

As a result of the Pittsburgh shooting I have committed to being much more proactive about cultivating relationships with people who are different from me, and to reach out when one of us is targeted.

What does this look like? It means calling my African American friends when Dylann Roof murdered nine African-Americans during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. It means calling my Muslim friends when President Trump tries to ban Muslims from coming to this country and moves the US Embassy to Jerusalem. It means calling my Latino friends when an ICE raid comes to Madison or we learn that over 2,600 migrant children were separated from their parents at the border. Or my transgender friends when we learn that President Trump is seeks to interpret Title IX, the federal civil rights law that bans sex discrimination in federally funded schools, so that it would effectively erase all protections for transgender people.

It’s not only offering condolences when one of us is attacked, but fostering real friendships and creating real connections.

I admit, I do not always do this. Life is busy, and it can be uncomfortable to reach out. We might say something wrong. Our overtures might not be appreciated. But we must try. We must prioritize these relationships.

Solidarity takes a lot of work, and it is the responsibility of all of us.

One of the challenging pieces of creating these relationships is that we don’t always recognize that what we say or do can be offensive to others. We don’t always think, or we simply do not know, because we don’t take the time to learn. We need to try harder and we need to do our own homework.

I want to share two examples. The first one is brief, but I share it because I want you to know that as a white person I have much growing to do. Until the shooting of Trayvon Martin, I don’t think I had any concept of how devastating is the violence perpetrated against black Americans. I could read the news, but I didn’t get it, on a deeper level. I believed that the police were there to protect all of us. I am continually learning, over and over, that this is simply not the case. And when I make those assumptions – like having a police presence in synagogues will make my

community feel safer, I am ignoring the experiences of Jews of color, who make up a growing part of the Jewish community. I am allowing my white privilege to blind me to the experiences of others. I am not fully grasping the depth of racism in this country. I need to listen better.

I want to spend more time on the second example and look at why Jews often feel uncomfortable around Christians – especially white Christians who hold an overwhelming amount of power in this country. American Jews have learned how to integrate into a diverse society, and have been able to pass, or blend in, as white people. That took a real toll on our community. Ditching some of our own rich traditions or our own unique identities was a heavy price to pay so that we could fit in and act like white Americans.

American Jews don't always feel like white Christians own, or even understand, that they have inherited a religious tradition that persecuted Jews in no uncertain terms over the last two thousand years. It is important for Christians, especially those who are descended from white Europeans, to acknowledge, accept, and deal with this history. This is a prerequisite for creating strong relationships and to work together to make the world a better place.

I do not have time to comprehensively go through this history now, but I will share some highlights – First, there were the harsh doctrines of the early church, the accusations that Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, that the Jews' exile from Palestine was their punishment for failing to accept Christianity.

In the Middle Ages, there were the Crusades, when Christians massacred entire Jewish communities, forced hundreds of thousands of Jews to convert, and caused them to flee to Muslim lands. There was the Blood Libel, the myth that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes, and the terrible riots against the Jews that followed as a result of these accusations. There were the expulsions, when Jews were banished from country after country.

In the modern era came racial antisemitism: Aryans were understood to be innately superior, Jews were innately inferior. Jews were accused of polluting pure Aryan blood by intermarriage.

Jews were accused of planning global domination, of being disloyal, of being communists, of being capitalists, of being rich and greedy, of controlling the media. We can see how these stereotypes persist today.

Then the Holocaust. The Nazi party drew on centuries of Christian antisemitism. Next week we mark 80 years since Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, when the Nazis destroyed 267 synagogues. Thirty-thousand Jewish men were rounded up. In 1939, World War II began. The Nazi genocide of the Jews went into full force. By 1945 the Nazis killed six million Jews, including 1.5 million Jewish children. Two-thirds of the nine million Jews who had been living in Europe disappeared.

This is the history that Jews carry with us, and when white Christians do not accept that their religious tradition perpetrated much of this persecution, it is difficult to create real trust. Much has changed since the Holocaust, and there has been a great deal of reckoning in the West with the church's role in the fomenting antisemitism. Antisemitism is not gone, however, and given

this reality you can understand that Jews feel uncomfortable when Christians try to convert us, or tell us we are going to hell because we do not accept Jesus Christ as our savior.

We cannot create solidarity from this place. We must instead immerse ourselves in a place of deep learning, of reckoning with history and with the present, and of taking responsibility for our actions and the actions of others.

There is a lot more to be said about religion and race, about power and powerlessness, and there is much complexity that we can explore. But as the time is short I will conclude with this:

In our multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious society, the only way we can really work towards social justice is by creating solidarity based on real respect. We all have to unlearn our prejudices. We all have to form real connections and relationships with each other. This is how we are going to defeat white supremacy. I hope you will join with me on this journey.

Thank you.