



Seeing Sunday morning on a Thursday afternoon

Like most people, I watched the events of August 11 and 12 unfold with shock and horror. I wouldn't wish this kind of tragedy on any community, but this one hit especially close to home because I serve in the Charlottesville District. I was grateful for the witness of the members of Ivy Creek UMC who organized a prayer vigil at Emancipation Park on Monday evening. And I knew other clergy and community members were holding vigil at the scene of the horrific car crash. But the images from the University of Virginia on Friday night haunted me the most (no doubt by design): flame-lit faces filled with malice, the flickering parade slithering through the grounds, the mob of hundreds of torches swarming around another statue and a dozen or so UVA students. These people planned

ahead. They chose their symbols wisely for maximum terror and intimidation.

In the coverage of the weekend, I read a tweet from a UVA professor saying something along the lines of “it feels like the Lawn needs an exorcism”. It may have been shared in a jocular tone, but the notion struck a chord with me. I’m not a Catholic priest and I don’t know Latin, but I do know a thing or two about the power of an incarnational Church. And if *they* were going to come in the night with torches and terror, then *we* were going to come in the light with prayer and presence.

The idea that came to mind was to walk through the grounds, attempting to retread the steps they had taken that Friday night, and to cover the area with prayer. We could help “clear the air” of the fumes of tiki-torches and echoes of hate chants.

I contacted as many clergy and churches as I could. I got a ton of positive feedback and encouragement, but very few persons who were available at the planned time. Most people were too far away or were unable to change standing plans. And I imagine some folks were justifiably anxious about the potential risk involved. Reliable sources indicated that many aggressors were still in town, intent on menacing the communities they had already injured. Nevertheless, by the morning of the walk, I knew we had the prayers of probably over 1,000 Christians from at least three UM Annual Conferences and at least five denominations.

I prepared a handout that included some guided prayers, some Bible verses, and a map of the grounds with the path from Friday's march highlighted. I took my clergy robe, my Bible, a few bottles of water, and some comfortable walking shoes. My friend Rev. Sarah Payne (Bethlehem-Jollivue, Staunton District) and I waited at the statue of Thomas Jefferson for about 10 minutes and then decided "two or more" had gathered and it was time to get to the work of the Church. The way I figure, with a thousand people covering this walk with prayer, we each wielded the weight of about 250 prayers per foot, so we walked slowly.

We used some of the prayers I had printed, but mostly we prayed as the Spirit led. I stopped and prayed "Kyrie Eleison" over some whitish substance coating a nearby plant. Having since watched the HBO Vice documentary, I now believe the substance was the residue of the milk-of-magnesia formula that a torch-bearer had poured in his eyes after getting pepper sprayed. Sarah knelt and prayed silently while touching a particular spot near the statue. Again, looking back at the documentary, I noticed that was the exact location where a man used his lighted torch to beat a student.

Over the course of two hours, we followed the route and continued to pray. We prayed for the students, staff, and faculty. We prayed for the families and parents at home who were sending their children here. We prayed for those who were returning to school with a newfound sense of fear. We prayed for the torch-bearers, that they would be released from whatever darkness it was that captivated them. We declared the lordship of Christ. At one point, I was taken aback by the words that came out of my mouth "The darkness thought it had won on Friday. It really thought it had won on Saturday. But praise God, Sunday came! Praise God, Sunday just keeps coming!"

I don't know how many people noticed the two women dressed in white robes muttering and meandering through the grounds that day. I'm not sure what effect this walk had on anyone beyond myself. But I want to tell you what "Sunday morning" looked like to me on that Thursday afternoon. We couldn't walk the Lawn (where the marchers definitely walked) because about 200 first-year students were gathered in small groups there. They were playing "icebreaker" games together, yelling and laughing and running, getting to know each other's names and stories. This day, the rich diversity of skin color and faith traditions represented was striking and profoundly inspiring. I knew that hope was already winning.

White supremacist groups say they're not done with Charlottesville yet. But I'll go out on a limb and say that the Body of Christ isn't done with Charlottesville (or the hearts and souls of white supremacists) yet either. We know what Sunday is, and we know that it's coming.

-The Rev. Erin Geoffrion