

#### 19.5.5 - "Love is a Verb" - Rev. Adam Hange - I John 4:7-21

I was meeting with the Central Pacific Conference Board of Directors, along with Steve Gililand, when I heard the news that Rachel Held Evans, Christian columnist, blogger, and writer had died. She was 37, a wife, and mother. A few weeks ago, Rachel contracted a case of the flu. It progressively worsened, and she had to be hospitalized. When doctors tried to treat her with antibiotics, she had a severe allergic reaction, and doctors had to put her in a medically induced coma. For weeks pastors and others who know her have been praying for her recovery. When they tried to bring her out of the coma late on Friday, the reaction worsened, and she died yesterday morning.

I had only read a little of her work, never met her. And yet, this news has made me incredibly sad. My older-sister, Christina, Kukuk, the pastor of Ashland UCC, had just heard Rachel speak at a conference in California. I messaged Christina this morning, to express my condolences, because I know she followed Rachel's work closely... and my sister said, yesterday she was stunned. Today she's just angry at God. She said, "There are so many other great candidates for an untimely death!" ... Humor is one of the ways we cope with sadness and grief.

Rachel Held Evans had written several books, but she's perhaps most famous for -"A Year of Biblical Womanhood" - which became a New York Times best-selling e-book.

She's been described as a wandering evangelical. I can relate. For, like here, I grew up in a conservative Christian church... and attended an evangelical college. In fact, I made a college visit to her alma mater, Bryan College, in Dayton, Tennessee, and seriously considered attending there. It's known for its literal interpretation of the Bible. Raised within that politically and theologically conservative world, she evolved from taking the Bible literally, to taking it seriously but not literally. On Twitter, she often sparred with popular evangelical pastors on a range of topics, including women and LGBTQ rights. Eventually she left evangelicalism altogether, and found a new church home in the Episcopal Church - thought she had a lot of love for the UCC!

As I reflect on how my journey of faith parallels hers, I think of how, though there are attitudes, ideas, and beliefs I was happy to leave behind, there were some really good things that I learned in that community. I learned to love God, read my Bible, and follow the teachings of Jesus. I learned that, "Jesus Loves Me"... that "Jesus Loves the Little Children, All the Children of the World" ... that "God has the Whole World in His/Her Hands" And, in the words of D.C. Talk - of 90s Christian Rap fame - I learned that "Luv is a verb!" **And that perfect love, casts out all fear....**

Which makes it so hard for me to understand how a person with such a similar upbringing, a churchgoer at an evangelical church with theology not unlike what I was taught, could walk into a synagogue in Poway, CA, and begin shooting, last week. Journalist, Julia Zausmer writes:

*“Before he allegedly walked into a synagogue in Poway, Calif., and opened fire, John Earnest appears to have written a seven-page letter spelling out his core beliefs: that Jewish people, guilty in his view of faults ranging from killing Jesus to controlling the media, deserved to die. That his intention to kill Jews would glorify God. Days later, the Rev. Mika Edmondson read those words and was stunned. “It certainly calls for a good amount of soul-searching,” said Edmondson, a pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a small evangelical denomination founded to counter liberalism in mainline Presbyterianism. Earnest, 19, was a member of an OPC congregation. His father was an elder. He attended regularly. And in the manifesto, the writer spewed not only invective against Jews and racial minorities but also cogent Christian theology. So the pastor read those seven pages, trying to understand. “We can’t pretend as though we didn’t have some responsibility for him — he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church,” Edmondson said.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is just the most recent example of religiously motivated hate and violence. ... Sri Lanka, ChristChurch, Pittsburgh... The litany of violence is too much to recount.<sup>2</sup> We should know and remember, religious fundamentalism exists within every major world religion. And we should look *“first to the log in our own eye, before we look to the splinter in our neighbors”* (Matthew 7:5). If we’re really honest, the Bible, if it is not read and taught carefully, can be, and has been, used to support supremacy, hate, and specifically anti-semitism.

Just a few weeks ago, during Holy Week, we retold the story of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, beating, and crucifixion. Every year I wince at the words “the Jews.” I wince because I have walked the barracks at Auschwitz, and seen the ovens with my own eyes, along with the mountains of shoes, and suitcases... I’ve witnessed the awful power of racial and religious hate,

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Zausmer, “The alleged synagogue shooter was a churchgoer who talked Christian theology, raising tough questions for evangelical pastors”, published May 1, accessed May 3, 2019: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.67bc65adcd8b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.67bc65adcd8b)

<sup>2</sup> Accessed May 3, 2019: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/04/28/san-diego-synagogue-shooting-attack-based-religion/3608726002/>

and I know how many in the Church, denied, allowed, or even knowingly supported those who perpetuated such violence.

And so every year, on Good Friday, I want to stand up and interrupt that service, and make a disclaimer about the latent anti-semitism still living within Christianity, and remind people that the crucifixion happened more than 2000 years ago, and those people are not the same people as our neighbors today. I want to remind people that Jews are our siblings in Abrahamic faith, as are Muslims, and each of our communities has suffered persecution.

And I want to remind, especially those who grew up, like me, with a literal interpretation of the Bible, that... Hate has no place in the hearts of the followers of Jesus. If your theology doesn't lead you to love your neighbor, I argue, you need re-examine that theology. And, in fact, a theology teaches *hate* for another you can be sure, that theology, is not of God. For God is love. Those who abide in love, abide in God, and God in them.

And you know what's both really hard, and really wonderful, about this teaching? It's that God loves me, and God loves You, and God loves all those people you and I perceive as "other." Isn't that amazing? *And frustrating!* And whenever I'm tempted to say, "O God, I hate those people" or "If I never met another... It'll be too soon!" I hear the Spirit of God speak to me, saying, "As I have loved you, so you are to love one another." And not in some wimpy sentimental kind of way. God's not some cosmic parent forcing us to hug our sibling and say "I love you!" through gritted teeth. God is Love, by definition, and God invites us, day-by-day, to a new way of being in this world. God invites us to be transformed.

Like Rachel Held Evans, I left the faith community that was my home, and sought out a community of faith where I hoped people understood this. I am so glad I found this denomination, and a church like this one, which which believes in transformation - not just in our hearts, our relationships with one another, but throughout the whole world. A church and a faith which teaches me to remember, Love is a verb. I don't presume to know all the reasons why you came to worship this Sunday, or any other Sunday, but I suspect it might be... (next page)

**Because we believe in extravagant welcome,  
Because we insist that God’s table is open, not closed,  
Because we believe God’s gift and claim in baptism are for all people...  
Because we demonstrate this Love through public professions of our  
identity and purpose: Our intentions to be a multi-racial, multicultural,  
open and affirming, and accessible to all community of faith.  
Because we advocate “justice for all” as an extension and expression of  
faith.  
Because we are open to new ways of being church and forming  
Christian community.  
Because we affirm that cultural differences *expand* our ability to  
welcome *all* God’s children,  
And strive to keep our perspective global in our partnership with people  
of all faiths, and no faith, around the world.<sup>3</sup>**

Why? Because we believe we are called to love one another... because we believe *all* love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Church, let our love be more than words. Let us love in word, and deed. And may the miracle of resurrection live in us, and through us, this day and evermore. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from UCC “What Shall We Bring?” 2019 Stewardship Resource pack.