

06/25/2023

The Rev. Kate Byrd

“Those Who Lose their Life Will Find It”

Megan Phelps-Roper was raised in the Westboro Baptist Church. A Topeka, KS based faith rooted in hyper-Calvinist beliefs. Often identified as a hate group because of their frequent protests around the country picketing against atheists, Jews, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and numerous Christian denominations. You have most likely seen them on the news pictured with ugly signs yelling out “God hates...” whatever group they are targeting that day. Growing up in this faith Megan remembers learning from her mother that the truth of the Bible could be summed up in three words, “obey, obey, obey!” Which is a pretty intense way to view a very long, very dense, very complex book. Especially considering the readings we hear today, like our Gospel passage from Matthew. As we hear Jesus say to us, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.” Are these the commandments of God that we are required or even suggesting to obey, obey, obey?

After growing up in the Westboro Baptist community, graduating college, and seeking to share her faith’s message Megan quickly found the wideopen world of social media and twitter. The perfect platform for her to promote Westboro’s teachings and ideologies to the world. Choosing to begin her “ministry” by speaking out against the Jewish faith, Megan tweeted that all Jews need to repent, to a man named David Abitol, who owned the twitter handle Jewlicious, and ran a website of the same name. Jewlicious responded, “Thanks Megan, that’s handy, what with Yom Kipur coming up and all,” (coincidentally Yom Kipur is the day of repentance in the Jewish faith). Thinking he must have misunderstood her, or taken her statement as sarcasm, Megan wanted to be sure her tone and words represented her intent. Retweeting, she responded that all Jewish rituals and beliefs were “dead rote rituals that would lead them all to hell.” This (as often happens on twitter) started a back and forth dialogue that at first was, to put it lightly, hostile. But, not long after, and quite astoundingly, the twitter feed turned from a mud slinging competition into a space of listening and mutual respect. Where, through questions and responses, made in a compassionate and loving way, an unlikely community was able to point out to Megan the theological inconsistencies within her church’s faith.

In their conversations David, her original target, questioned why the Westboro Baptist church demanded the death penalty for gay people, when Jesus himself said “let he who is not guilty cast the first stone.” And, while Megan and her church’s ideologies already had a response at the ready, “well, we aren’t casting stones, we are merely using words.” David questioned further, “but you are advocating that the state casts stones, which in turn allows you to participate in that same act.” As David and the others on the twitter feed continued to converse, using what psychologists call “moral reframing”; a tool allowing them to gently appeal to Megan’s larger sense of right and wrong, good and evil; the threads of Megan’s loosely held together faith quickly began to unravel. Leaving Megan to question the motives and theology of her own beliefs for the first time in her life. Beliefs that she held so strongly and shared so vehemently for the, quite honestly, very honorable reason that deep down she simply wanted to do what was right, and she desperately desired to help the world. From her very first introduction to language Megan had been taught that sharing hate speech and hurtful rhetoric was a way in which her church sought to love the world and “save the lost from damnation.” Training her to use hateful rhetoric as a “compassionate act of

salvation.” But, as Megan was beginning to see, the ideology of her own faith held not only inconsistencies but life threateningly hurtful messages, causing her to question, reimagine, and reorient herself towards her ideas of faith, God, and ultimately her place in the world.

What do we do with the troubling passages we hear in our own sacred texts? What do we do when God seems harsh, Jesus seems demanding, or even when our scripture seems to contradict itself? What do we do with our questions, our insecurities, our fears surrounding our faith, our Bible, our God? Do we push them aside or ignore them? Do we allow them to turn us away from our beliefs and our religion? Do we lean into them? Do we bring them to people and places we trust? Do we lay them at the feet of our Good Shepherd and in the hands of our Almighty Creator? Do we wrestle with them like Jacob, never giving up, demanding that we not leave without the blessing of God?

Eventually, after much turmoil, questioning, and conversations with trusted friends, Megan left the Westboro Baptist Church, her family, and everything she had known and loved. And while difficult and life altering, this move away from her former faith gave Megan a meaningful posture of grace towards others and the world. Most especially those who are doing and a part of the same harmful rhetoric and ideologies she once clung so tightly to. Because, as she says, “I remember what it was like to be absolutely swayed by bad ideas.” And ultimately, Megan believes, what separates her from her family who are still ingrained in that faith, and estranged from her, is that someone made space and time in a loving and compassionate manner, to allow her to see our world, our faith, our God as much more than simply black and white. And for that Megan says, she is eternally grateful, because it allowed her to learn how to change. And more so, allowed her to have hope in our world and our future, even today.

I have to say that recently I have been really struggling with how to live in a world that seems unequivocally divided. And, there are moments where I am not sure that there is any hope. Where I hear Jesus’ words from today and about division in families and swords instead of peace, and think, yup that sounds a lot of Thanksgiving dinners I’ve been to. But the story of Megan Phelps-Roper, leads me to believe that there can be hope. If only we are able to make space for it. And, more so, that maybe Jesus is right, in the fact that there are times and spaces where we will and need to be divided, not so much as a people but maybe more so within ourselves. Where we need to question so that we can decide, is all that we have learned from the person of Jesus, from a life oriented towards the Divine, and dedicated to our loving creator making space for us to continue to grow and change? Not pointing fingers, or spitting out hate speech. But, calling us to make space for the other, to share in conversations that make room for deep listening and create responses grounded in love and compassion. Bringing about change in a world that is ever evolving. As Jesus says to us today, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Questioning is not a sin, but a gift. Uncertainty is not the undoing of our salvation but maybe quite literally the beginning of salvation for our world. What might it mean for us, like Megan did, or like Jesus is suggesting, to lean into the uncertainties of this world, the questions of our heart, the needs of current times, and allow them to encourage some dividing within our own hearts and faith. Not in order to break us down, but in order to make us more open. To bring about more space and room within our thinking and our lives so that we too might see the hope Megan found, and the love Jesus sought to bring into our world. Allowing us to fully live into the great commandment, loving God with all our heart mind and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.