

“The Bible: A New Creation”
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In her book, *See No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur, tells the sad stories of many Americans from the Sikh communities who lost their lives to violence in the aftermath of 9/11 because they were confused with Muslims. She writes, “on September 15, I...got a phone call from a close friend in Phoenix. Balbir Uncle had been killed. Breathless details spilled out of the phone. He was standing in front of his gas station in Mesa, Arizona, about to plant crates of flowers, when a gunman reeled around the corner in a black pickup truck, tipped the barrel of a gun out of the window, and shot him five times in the back. He bled to death where he fell, his turban knocked to the side. Balbir Singh Sodhi was a Sikh American, a family friend I called uncle, killed by a man who called himself a patriot. He was the first of nineteen people killed in hate crimes in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.”

The sad and painful reality that every time we experience a national wound or a crisis, we repeat a similar pattern of hate and violence. In recent months, we have become more aware of hate crimes and harassment of people of Asian descent in our country. Most recently, there was the viral video of a Vietnamese American being dragged by a car when a thief stole her purse. Because some have blamed the coronavirus on China, in this last year people of Asian descent, have experienced a rise in hate against them. This past week we saw a horrific outcome of this kind of hate in the shooting of Asian American women in Atlanta.

This brings me to another great theme of scripture championed by the Apostle Paul. It is the theme of “New Creation.” Paul himself was a perpetrator of hate. He was deceived and blinded by his religious and national loyalty to see the followers of Jesus as a threat to his people. He was committed to eliminating any threat to his people’s well-being even if it meant committing violence against other people. In fact, his conversion experience took place while he was on his way to commit acts of hate and violence in the name of God. It is very powerful to see that half of the New Testament was written by or attributed to Paul. He had an incredible impact on the spread of the Christian way more than any of the immediate disciples of Jesus. He established churches, he expanded the outreach of the church to outsiders, he went on missionary trips, and he counseled many churches about conflict and staying faithful to the way of Christ. He was imprisoned and tortured for his faith and he never wavered in his love for the stranger. This was a man filled with prejudice and anger, but who was completely changed by the power of Christ.

I often speak about opening ourselves up to God’s Spirit to allow the work of transformation to take place in us. Yet, there are times when God’s Spirit takes a hold of us when we are most resistant and closed. It turns our worlds upside down and opens new avenues for love that we did not even imagine to be possible.

Our work at such times is just to wonder and to be in awe! Instead of going to our natural ways of judging and analyzing, the invitation is to allow grace to catch our attention and lead us into awe!

Paul learned to do that the hard way. He had to be knocked down by grace and blinded before he finally let go of his desire for control and for violence. Yet, because of the depth of his experience, he became a great teacher and preacher. He learned through the power of grace that gripped him, that control was just an illusion.

In one of his teachings to the church in Corinth, he helped them to see the grace of God as leading them into a new way of being in the world that was different from the ways of control and power. The world around them was that of power and competition. Even within the church in Corinth, that spirit of division, prejudice, and classism reigned supreme. There were people who were trying to lord it over others by bringing in their prestige into the gathered community. There were differences of opinion about faith which ended up dividing the congregation. It was all the typical messy stuff of human community.

And so in this part of the letter from 2 Corinthians 5, we hear the Apostle calling them to pay attention to the new life of grace that was emerging within and among them. Instead of trying to fix their differences with intellectual arguments about who was right or who was wrong, Paul reminded them of paying attention to the power of grace among them. He called them to a new sense of wonder about life.

God is always working in and through us to turn hate and anger into love and care. It is hard to believe that when we see the realities of hate and fear around us being so strong. I am sure that when the followers of Christ in Damascus heard about Paul and his violent ways, they did not imagine anything good to happen in or through him. He would have been the last person on their minds to imagine as becoming an apostle for Christ. When Ananias of Damascus received a call from God to go help Paul and heal him, he hesitated. He knew of Paul's past, hate, and evil. He had no interest in reaching out to a hateful man like Paul. Yet, because the nudge of God was so strong in his heart, he did it and the results were so amazing. I also wonder what happened to the people who were like Paul who were trying to intimidate and eliminate their enemies. How did they react? Did they see the light just like Paul did, or did they dismiss him?

The story and teachings of Paul invite us to a new way of life. This new way is governed by the values of grace where we learn to expect the unexpected. Instead of boxing people (and God) in, we are invited to see where the Spirit is bubbling up and bringing new life. Where is the Spirit of grace bubbling up for you? Where do you see it bubbling up in our world? Where are you called to join it?

At the end of her book, *See No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur tells about the surprising healing that took place when the brother of the Sikh man who was killed reached out to the killer. Here is a part of the dialogue that took place when Rana (the brother) called Frank (the man who killed Balbir). This was after fifteen years of grief and through the help of a friend. "I want you to know from my heart, I'm sorry for what I did to your brother." Frank said. "One day, when I go to heaven to be judged by God, I will ask to see your brother, and I will hug him, and I will ask him for forgiveness." "We already forgave you," Rana said, choking back tears. *Forgiveness is not forgetting: Forgiveness is freedom from hate.* "If I had the power to take you out from prison, I would do it right now." Rana said. "If one

day you come out, we can both go to the world and tell the story.' ... 'I know I can't give you back what I wish I could, which is your brother,' Frank said, 'but I hope you find some comfort in knowing that I'm very sorry for what happened to your brother and your whole family and his wife and everyone.'"

Valarie Kaur goes on to invite all of us to practice wonder about others instead of judgment. She writes, "Seeing no stranger begins in wonder. It is to look upon the face of anyone and choose to say: *You are a part of me I do not yet know*. Wonder is the wellspring for love. Who we wonder about determines whose stories we hear and whose joy and pain we share. Those we grieve with, those we sit with, and weep with, are ultimately those we organize with and advocate for. When a critical mass of people come together to *wonder* about one another, *grieve* with one another, and *fight* with and for one another, we begin to build the solidarity needed for collective liberation and transformation -a solidarity rooted in love."

Wonder is the crack in the door that allows us to move beyond our small mindedness and hate to embrace and flow with grace. Sometimes wonder knocks us down like it did with Paul, but other times, it comes to us in moments of small encounters of love or awe. Whatever the case may be for you, also leave the door to your heart cracked open. You never know when the next moment of surprising grace will come to you. Remember that the healing of the world starts in such moments.

Lectio Divina 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

"16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Amen.