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A New Direction

By Edgar F. Solis

Introduction:

On October 29, 2013, Catherine Wynne wrote in a BBC article about what happened in Michigan in 1996.

Keshia Thomas was 18 when the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist organization, held a rally in her hometown in Michigan.

Liberal, progressive, and multicultural, Ann Arbor was an unusual place for the KKK to choose, and hundreds of people gathered to show them they were not welcome.

The atmosphere was tense but controlled.

Police dressed in riot gear and armed with tear gas protected a small group of Klansmen in white robes and conical hoods.

Thomas was with a group of anti-KKK demonstrators on the other side of a specially-erected fence.

Then, a woman with a megaphone shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd."

They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a Confederate flag T-shirt.

He tried to walk away from them, but the protesters, including Thomas, followed, "just to chase him out."

It was unclear whether the man was a Ku Klux Klan supporter, but to the anti-KKK protesters, his clothes and tattoos represented precisely what they had come to resist.

The Confederate flag he wore was for them, a symbol of hatred and racism, while the S-S tattoo on his arm pointed to a belief in white supremacy, or worse.

There were shouts of "Kill the Nazi," and the man began to run, but he was knocked to the ground.

A group surrounded him, kicking him and hitting him with the wooden sticks of their placards.

Mob mentality had taken over.

"It became barbaric," says Keshia Thomas. "When people are in a crowd, they are more likely to do things they would never do as an individual. Someone had to step out of the pack and say, 'This isn't right.'"

So the teenager, then still in high school, threw herself on top of a man she did not know and shielded him from the blows.

Keshia also said, "When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down."

For Mark Brunner, a student photographer who witnessed the episode, it was who she saved that made Keshia Thomas' actions so remarkable.

"She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her," he says. "Who does that in this world?"

A black teenager protected a white man from an angry mob who thought he supported the racist Ku Klux Klan.

It was an act of extraordinary courage and kindness - and is still inspiring people today.

All because she decided to take a different direction in her mind and heart.

Change is all around us, even in the church. And change is never easy.

Context Matters:

This week's text is about a whole new direction for the church's beginnings.

It has to do with who was considered worthy of including and who should be avoided.

The Holy Spirit pushed the church to go further than they were comfortable, and that has been the church's story from then on.

A Bible commentary states that Peter argues that the Holy Spirit is on the move, including Jews and Non-Jews – Gentiles in the emerging new community, and “who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

Reading Acts and other Gospel passages, we can discern a narrative arc in Peter's understanding:

For instance, in the Gospel of John, the foot-washing story, Peter learns that he is both “entirely clean” and commanded to love in ways that bridge divides between “high” and “low,” “clean” and “unclean” (John 13:10).

Over time, with the Spirit's help, he learns that he “should not call anyone profane or unclean,” for God “shows no partiality” — God's love is indeed open to all (Acts 10:34,28).

Theological Reflection:

The world is getting a different direction, a direction of global consciousness, inclusion, equality, and cultural and racial understanding.

Amazingly, and so often, this understanding is not coming from the spiritual or religious expressions of our society, but from the non-religious thinkers, activists, and movements, many times even from the atheist philosophy.

Hard to understand when we give up sharing the good news with a message of love and inclusion!

It is precisely the church of God, the corporate entity that must raise on high God's message of Love and Compassion!

Through the message of Jesus Christ, God empowers us to live and share that EVERYONE is welcome, accepted, and affirmed as they are.

Messages of division, discrimination, and hate must be rejected and denounced if we claim to be Christians in a world where division and tensions threaten our planet's very existence!

The world today must hear the powerful message of Christ through the church!

It is urgent and necessary!

Hear and look at what happened this week.

Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was killed on May 11 by Israeli forces in Jenin, in the occupied West Bank.

The 51-year-old Palestinian-American TV correspondent for Al Jazeera Arabic was wearing a protective vest marked with "PRESS" and standing with other journalists when she was shot dead.

Abu Akleh's death is the latest in a long line of journalists killed by the Israeli military, which has a long history of targeting reporters and other media members.

The Summit of the Americas is held every three years in a different country.

This is the premier event for hemispheric bonding.

On June 6-10 in Los Angeles, California, this important meeting will be the first hosted by the United States since its inaugural session in Miami in 1994.

Now, in a potential diplomatic conflict, many hemispheric leaders have said they will not attend the event hosted by President Biden next month in Los Angeles because the US

government is considering not inviting certain countries because of their political and economic systems.

Exclusion and rejection that is playing hard and rude in the world!

Conclusion:

Today is the day of a new direction in our faith!

Today, we need to explore possibilities to believe, experience, and promote inclusion and not rejection – acceptance and not discrimination!

God calls us to remember that following Jesus today means living out this dignifying, leveling, bridge-building love in our own lives and circumstances.

How have we embodied these new directions of love in our context?

Peter had to change his understanding, his cultural perspective, and his behavior.

Keshia Thomas went beyond. She took a different direction, and she was able to put her life at risk to save her “enemy.”

As a simple application for this message, I want to challenge you to identify a person this week, someone who looks, thinks, or believes differently than you.

Take a different direction.

Break the prejudice.

Dare to interact with this person you will be amazed of how God will manifest his presence in your life!

Amen!

