This sermon starts with a caveat: This is a sermon about change. And it’s also about people who started in a terrible place: as white nationalists. Some of the things I’ll talk about might be disturbing to some folks here. If someone here feels like it’s too much to hear, I invite you to take care of yourself. If you need to walk out, I understand. And it wouldn’t be the first time.

I’m here today to talk about the possibility that we can change for the better. And by we, I mean everyone. Our Universalist ancestors believed that everyone would receive salvation, simply because God was too generous, and too loving to damn people to eternal punishment. And our ancestors believed that this universal salvation created an obligation in us to live up to the salvation that we all were going to get.

Standing in this pulpit in 2019, I interpret that Universalist belief to mean that everyone, and I mean everyone, can be redeemed. All of us. In these times, I’m sure that there are folks in this sanctuary who are wondering if there are some public figures who are beyond redemption. I understand their concerns, but I do mean everyone. Beyond the public realm, I would also venture a guess that there are people in this sanctuary who might think that they themselves are beyond redemption. I too have moments when I think back on my life and wonder if I can ever be fully redeemed. It some ways it might be harder to extend that redemptive grace to ourselves. But what an act of generosity, right?

Yet even as I believe in the possibility of redemption, I need to be honest about the nature of humans. People are equally capable of living a lie as they are capable of living lives of integrity. The Czech playwright and statesmen Vaclav Havel states this eloquently in his essay The Power of the Powerless:

He writes: “The essential aims of life are present naturally in every person. In everyone there is some longing for humanity’s rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence. Yet at the same time, each person is capable, to a greater or lesser degree, of coming to terms with living within the lie. Each person somehow succumbs to a profane trivialization of their inherent humanity. In everyone there is some willingness to merge with the anonymous crowd and to flow comfortably along with it down the river of pseudo-life.” End of quote.

Still, it’s fundamental to my way of being as a minister that I believe everyone can change. I hold out that hope. I don’t think I could be a minister if I thought any other way about it. But I also want to say that while I truly believe in universal redemption, I also believe in accountability, especially the accountability of people in power. So for the people who think that it’s morally acceptable respond to treat asylum seekers with cruelty, I say yes, those people can be redeemed. And, they have a lot to account for first before that redemption comes.
I want to tell you about two men changed their minds. Both of these men were deeply engaged in the white supremacist movement in this country. Derek Black is the son of the former national leader of the Klu Klux Klan who was also the founder of the white nationalist website Stormfront. His mother’s first husband was David Duke. What a family. Stormfront was a site that recruited and radicalized many white people into white supremacy in this country and across the world. The web site was finally kicked off the mainstream web after the Charlottesville Rally in 2017 but it still exists on the dark web.

Derek grew up in that environment in Florida and was homeschooled and eventually went to work for Stormfront, hosting the youth web forum and joining his father on a daily racist radio show. His was a sanitized kind of racism, where he would say things like “I don’t hate people of color, I just really love white people, and we’re fighting for our survival!” Of course, he was also actively creating the space for other white supremacists to say much, much worse things.

He ended up going to college at a place called New College of Florida. He chose it because it was both cheap and highly rated. He had no idea that it was also a profoundly diverse liberal arts college. And it was there that he met and made friends with people not like himself. One of them was an immigrant from Peru, and the other an orthodox Jew. He even ended up going to shabbat dinners on Friday nights and dated a secular Jewish woman for awhile. This was all while he was still moderating the largest white nationalist web site in the world and calling into the radio show five mornings a week.

Eventually his identity was discovered on campus and an interesting thing happened. So at the time, the student body had an online forum that they all used. And once the shock hit, this online forum became a public record of how folks were reacting to the fact that there was an active white supremacist in their midst. The students there responded in a variety of ways:
- Some folks did not feel safe.
- Some folks felt that he should be at minimum, shunned, and even outright driven from their campus. Some folks wondered if it was morally OK to associate with a person like Derek at all.
- Others felt like it was only engagement that would change him. If they pushed him away, they’d just be justifying all the things that liberals were accused of.

His Jewish girlfriend dropped him like a bad habit. But his orthodox Jewish friend was in the camp with the folks who thought that engagement was the path. This faithful person continued to share his shabbat table with Derek Black. Eventually, Derek began to see another woman, also a student at that school. This woman began a long campaign to make Derek see the vile stupidity of his ideas. She saw that he was capable of redemption, and she diligently stuck by him while he slowly began to see the light. She even went with him to a “conference” of white supremacists that was held in Tennessee. Over and over she debated him, refuting his talking points one by one. They must have had a powerful mutual attraction to sit together in conflict for such a long time. But ultimately, she succeeded. Derek finally disavowed his white supremacist beliefs and told his father. His family disowned him. But Derek did not go public with his change of heart.

He didn’t go public until Donald Trump began to run for the presidency, and Derek heard the same arguments he used to make on his racist radio show, that same kind of lightly sanitized
racism, now coming out of the mouth of the candidate. After Trump won, Derek wrote an editorial that was published in the New York Times entitled “Why I Left White Nationalism”. Frankly, I think Derek Black has a long way to go to make amends for his decades of spreading hate, but that’s a sermon for another day. He did change, and we can celebrate and learn from that.

Our next subject didn’t grow up in a white supremacist family, but he too found his way to violent white supremacy. Chris Picciolini grew up in Blue Island, which is an working class suburb of Chicago. His parents were the children of immigrants from Sicily and they ran a beauty salon, aspiring to set up their children for a better life. They weren’t around much and he grew up dividing his time between going to a school in another, more wealthy school district and the home of his grandparents back in Blue Island. He felt like an outsider in both places and became, over time, an awkward loner.

He was just the kind of rootless boy who was ripe for recruitment by a local white nationalist. His parents thought that economic stability and improvement were what mattered most. Overwhelmed by their work, they neglected Chris’s emotional life, which made him vulnerable to anyone who took what seemed like a benign interest in him.

As a young teenager, he fell in with this charismatic adult who seemed to take him seriously. Unfortunately, this charismatic adult was a violent white supremacist who filled Chris with hateful doctrine. And Chris jumped into his new identity with both feet. There was a whole culture to embrace: clothes (combat boots and bomber jackets) and music (heavy metal) and literature (all kinds of odious lies).

During high school he began recruiting other members. With his crew, he began to use his new ideology to terrorize people of color but also to simply justify any violent act that he felt like doing. At one point he held a kid up at gunpoint for his jacket. When he tried the jacket on, he found one of his own recruitment flyers in the pocket. He had robbed one of his own, but that didn’t stop him from continuing to do that kind of thing. He formed a rock band and wrote racist lyrics. He started a company that sold white supremacist music by mail-order and used that to develop a national network of like-minded racists.

Along the way he also fell in love, and that began the fragmenting of his life. She wasn’t part of the movement and he began to have to lie to her about what he was doing and why. (Are you seeing a pattern yet?) Eventually she got pregnant and they got married. At 19 years old, he was simultaneously a leader in the national white supremacist movement and a father and husband.
As he continued to lie to his wife, he also began to witness the ways that the people he was with were less than admirable. He saw how they abused their girlfriends and spouses. He saw how a prominent leader groomed young men for service in the movement and also sexual predation. And another thing happened: He opened a record store in Blue Island to sell white supremacist music. But in order to make the business work financially, he sold other kinds of music. This meant that he ended up meeting customers from all walks of life. The cognitive dissonance began and his doubts grew.

When he and his wife had a second son, he began to wonder about a world without prejudice. But he still kept a foot in white supremacy. Disgusted, his wife left him. He lost his business, moved into his parent’s basement, and fell into a deep depression, completely withdrawing from the movement and from life.

After five years he recovered from his depression sufficiently to begin working again. He understood what he had done and felt deep shame about it. In 2009 he started an organization called Life After Hate which helps former extremists work to counter racism.

Reading Derek Black’s biography and Chris Picciolene’s memoir, when they both finally arrive at this moment of clarity, of the shedding of an old identity and the slow recovery of their senses, I’m reminded of the line from the William Stafford poem that we read this week. That line goes “But that’s when you get going best, glad to be lost, learning how real it is here on earth, again and again”. Chris and Derek both felt this deep sense of both being adrift without their old identities and communities, but also renewed by the possibility of a fresh start.

What do Derek and Chris’s stories tell us about how people change their minds? There are a few patterns:
- They both got exposed to new people and ideas. Isolation is very helpful for extremism. It’s harder to demonize your neighbor when you know their family and their struggles. I’m reminded of the Mark Twain quote: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of people and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” End of quote. In today’s internet age, we don’t need to physically travel to be broadened.
- They both grappled with the flaws in the logic of white supremacy. I have my own experience of this in a slightly different setting. Last year I served a congregation in Salt Lake City. At this congregation we had what we called the Religious Transition Group that met after church every other week and it was open to the public. It was a support group for folks coming out of some all-consuming religion, in most cases the Church of Latter Day Saints. And I noticed an interesting trend. When folks talked about why they had to leave the Mormons, often at great personal cost, I always assumed that it would be because of the sexism and homophobia. But the majority of the time, they said they had to leave the LDS church because it just didn’t make any sense! I’m a little stunned by that but I think it speaks to our deep human need to for things to be logical. Go figure.

Continuing with the pattern of awakening:

- Chris and Derek were held accountable by a loved one. Let’s be real: Women are the great educators of men. It’s a completely unsung role, but every woke man owes a great debt to the women who patiently tolerated their nonsense and guided them into a better place.

- And finally, Derek and Chris were made uncomfortable by what they saw and thought. The pain that they were causing people, the lies that they were forced to mouth, and the relationships that they lost all made them suffer, and that suffering gave them the will to change.

After all that, I still can’t say that there’s a surefire way to change people’s minds. What works in one situation might not work in another. I want to finish by sharing a story that my buddy Mike told me recently. Mike used to be the editor of a rural newspaper in Kentucky. In 2010, when Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was up for renewal, he wrote an editorial about it. For folks who don’t know, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was a policy created during the Clinton administration that stated that people serving in the military would not be asked about their sexual orientation, but they also could not talk about it. It was a tiny step forward in 1992, I guess, but by 2010 that policy was just plain discrimination.

Drawing on he and his wife’s combined forty years of service in the Marine Corps, Mike wrote an editorial about the policy under review. The title of the editorial was “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell? Don’t Care”. In that editorial in that rural newspaper in Kentucky, he said that people who are actually serving in the military don’t care if the people that they serve with are queer. They only care that the person is competent at their job and can be relied upon in a crisis situation. He went on to say that the only people who cared about it were politicians and preachers. Not all preachers, obviously but some very vocal ones. And I just want to add here, as someone who has been to war, when the situation gets dire, the person I want next to me is someone who has endured being queer in middle school. I know that they, of all people, are going to be tough when toughness is required.

Anyway, Mike had a practice of running his editorials by the two ladies who made up the rest of the staff at his little newspaper. When he gave it to them to read, all he heard from the other room was a lot of molar sucking. Finally, they came back and their only comment was “Well,
there aren’t any spelling errors.” Mike ran the editorial regardless. The next day he got a voicemail from a reader who described herself as “a nice church lady from Cranberry, KY”. Mike braced himself, expecting that this was going to be a long day. She went on to say that she read his editorial, and had prayed on it, and had decided that she agreed with it. She had changed her mind. And she even brought it to her church bible study so they could talk about it. That ended up being a really good day for Mike.

Mike told me that there were three lessons in that for him. He realized that if he wanted to change people’s minds, he needed to do three things: He needed to be sure, he needed to be right, and he needed to be patient. And he added an extra clarification. He needed to be right, but not righteous. I’ll be honest: that’s a lesson that I need to hear now and again.

And the patience is critical. Mike added another story to the one that he told, which, if you know Mike, is no surprise whatsoever. Mike shared the story Joel Salatin, who was a pioneer of sustainable agriculture. Years ago, Joel jumped into organic farming with both feet. But in the beginning, he really struggled. He couldn’t get folks to appreciate the value of the meat and produce he was raising, and he was slowly going broke. In frustration, he went to talk to his grandfather about it. His grandfather listened and told Joel this: He said “Country folks can tolerate you as a neighbor if you’re a Buddhist. And they can tolerate you if you’re a nudist. But it’s just too much for them if you’re a Buddhist nudist.” And in that lesson, Joel realized that he was trying to get folks to embrace too much, too fast. He was trying to be a Buddhist nudist. So he changed his approach and went on to be a national leader of sustainable agriculture. Patience is part of the process of helping folks change their minds.

As we consider how to change minds, let’s remember that the mind that needs changing might be our own. Whatever change we aspire to make, let us be motivated by compassion and love.

Amen, and blessed be.