This morning I want to do something a little different. In a few moments, I <u>am</u> going to preach a shortened sermon about our Gospel lesson. But first, I want to do something I don't usually do in the pulpit—I want to say a few words about an unrelated practical topic:

How do Christians make moral and ethical decisions? I want to use the recent events in Charlottesville as a brief case study and offer some possible tools that I hope might be helpful for you.

During my time in college and in medical school in the 1980's, ethics was not part of the core curriculum. However, several courses were required in seminary. And as part of those classes, our professor of ethics and moral theology had us spend a fair amount of time trying to think through difficult ethical questions in a systematic way. In the aftermath of Charlottesville, our national discourse has become a bit tangled up in the way we approach the moral implications of what happened. So I want to offer a window onto the way I think through some of these issues. I do this not to try to impose my views, but rather as a way to offer a possible template or model for ways you might approach making your own decisions and coming to your own ethical conclusions.

There are two main ideas I learned in seminary ethics classes that I would offer. First, it's often helpful to "name the goods in conflict." Ethical conundrums often center around several good things that compete with each other, for example, individual rights versus the needs of the community—both are good and important, though sometimes there are occasions when they bump up against each other, and you have to determine which issue is most important ethically. And occasionally, there are some sets of issues that bump up against each other that are clearly not good. Then you have to determine which issue is the lesser of two evils.

Second, it's often helpful to "order the goods" systematically—what are the most important principles involved, and subsequently, what repercussions or actions logically follow from those principles? This is often a place where we get tangled up, and a place where we can fall into the trap of making a false moral equivalence. It's thus important to identify which moral statements are primary, and which are secondary, tertiary, etc.

Further, we might find that we're in agreement with a large number of folks in the primary statements, but diverge as we move through subsidiary levels. Thinking through these issues in an orderly way gives us a tool that allows us to recognize the places where we agree (which often tend to be shared or core principles) and then know where we have disagreements (which often tend to be ways that we act on our principles, or the ways we make specific policies).

In reference to Charlottesville I would state as a primary principle that Nazism, white supremacy, racism, etc., are morally repugnant, and antithetical to the Good News of Jesus Christ. I think I would get wide agreement on this statement. I could start with a different statement that might yield slightly different results. But we'll start with this: Nazism is morally repugnant, etc.

Second, I would then ask the question, "If Nazism is evil, what is the correct response?" I could come up with two options: ignore it, or oppose it.

Third, if I oppose it, should it be with words or with actions?

Fourth, if with actions, should they be non-violent, or is it better to counter force with force?

Fifth, if with force, should that force come from individuals/mobs or should it be from duly appointed peace officers?

By thinking through this question, I personally would come to these conclusions:

Yes, Nazism is wrong, and it should be resisted. But my preference would be for that resistance to be non-violent protests.

And if there are counter-protesters who become violent themselves, I would denounce that, unless it was in self-defense.

But that rejection of violence from counter-protesters is well on down the ladder (level 5 in my example), while my condemnation of Nazism in the first place is level 1. Thus these two denunciations are nowhere near moral equivalence. So I would conclude that Nazism is repugnant *prima facie* (at face value) and should be absolutely rejected. And while I would agree with the counter-protesters that Nazism is evil, I would disagree with some of the counter-protesters on their tactics, and I would see it as inappropriate for them to respond with violence of their own.

Again, I hope that's helpful, and might give you some tools for your own ethical decision making. If not, here we go with the sermon:

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Like a rock. Solid as a rock. These phrases imply steadiness. Something that is permanent. Something that is unchangeable. Something that is steadfast. Something that will last.

But in ancient times, when the Bible was written, the image of a rock was only stronger. After all, in the Old Testament, God himself is often called the Rock of Israel, or the Rock of Salvation. It was from the rock that life giving waters gushed forth in the desert. Paul speaks of Christ as the life-giving rock. Peter speaks of Jesus as a living stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious.

Also, you may remember Jesus' parable about the wise man who built his house upon the rock, and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. And when the rains came down and the floods came up, only the house with the rock foundation stood firm.

Rocks have a long and important pedigree in scripture.

       This morning in our Gospel lesson, we hear that the disciple Simon, the brother of Andrew, the son of Jonah, gets a new name. Jesus gives him the name Peter, or Rock.

       We should rightly see this as an important event. After all, Simon has done very well. He's just declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. And Jesus tells him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

       And because of Simon's faith, he gets a new name, the name Peter, which means Rock. Actually, a better translation for our ears might be Rocky. Imagine Jesus saying, 'Simon, from now on you're going to be called Rocky,' or 'Simon, you're going to be my Rock. And furthermore, on this Rock I'm going to build my church.'

       It sounds like Jesus has good construction techniques in mind. He is after all a carpenter's son. He knows the importance of rock foundations. So who could possibly be better than Peter, the spiritual rock, as a foundation for the church?

       Well, the real story is quite bit more complicated. The disciple Simon doesn't live up to his nickname, Peter. He doesn't act very rock like, at least at first.

       After all, in the very next section of Matthew, which we'll read next week, Jesus tells the disciples that he has to suffer and die, and Peter won't have any part of it. Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me Satan."

       Peter doesn't understand what Jesus' Messiahship is really about. He's not ready for a Messiah who suffers and dies. And so Jesus gives him a rather severe dressing down. Peter's got the new nickname. But he's off to a rocky start as a Rocky. Peter seems very un-rock-like.

       And later, that when push comes to shove, Peter will deny Jesus. In our Gospel today, Peter seems to know who Jesus is when he proclaims, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." But later in Jerusalem, in the early morning hours of Good Friday, Peter not only forgets who Jesus is, but out of fear, he denies that he even knows Jesus.

       Peter doesn't seem very rock-like. It almost looks as if Jesus has made a bad choice.

       "On this rock I will build my church"? The foundation of Peter looks more and more like the foundation of the foolish man's house. For all intents and purposes, it looks like Jesus is building his church upon the sand. Simon Peter looks like the most unpromising foundation for any kind of church, ever. From the accounts in the Gospels, Simon Peter should have a different nickname. He should not be nicknamed Rocky. He should be nicknamed Sandy.

       And yet, something happens to Peter. Actually I think, two things happen to Peter. First, Peter experiences forgiveness in the presence of the risen Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus gives Peter 3 opportunities to proclaim his love.

These 3 affirmations of love for Jesus wipe away the 3 time that Peter had denied Jesus. Peter experiences Jesus' forgiveness.

Second, Peter is given the gift of God's Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, Acts tells us, that after all the apostles receive the Spirit, it is Peter who stands up boldly in Jerusalem and proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter who had told Jesus that suffering wasn't necessary, Peter who had denied even knowing Jesus, stands up publicly in the temple. He proclaims to all who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he had suffered, died, and been raised.

Peter had been changed and transformed. He was now willing to be imprisoned for his faith. And, eventually, he was willing to die for his faith. Around 64 AD, church tradition tells us, Peter was crucified in Rome. But, because he didn't feel worthy to suffer the same type of death as his Lord, he asked to be crucified upside down. Peter, who objected to the cross, Peter who once denied Jesus and fled, that same Peter later very literally takes up his own cross and follows Jesus.

Simon bar Jonah, who had a very sandy beginning, did eventually live up to his name. He eventually lived into his name. He did become rock like. Like sand which is cemented together to become sandstone, and like sandstone that is heated to become hard quartzite, Peter, through the work of God, was transformed from unstable and shifting sand into solid rock.

Peter is a good reminder to all of us of what the power of God can do. He's a reminder that God can shape and mold and fashion us if we'll let him.

Like Peter, we all have our sandy moments. But if we allow God to work with our sandiness, he can transform it into something more rock like. Like Peter, God has an image of us, of what we could be like, of what we're called to be like. Like the shifting Peter who had to grow into being a Rock, we too have to grow into the full stature of what we're created to be.

We're each called to respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" And the best response comes not with our lips, but with our lives. The way we order our lives, at home, at work, at school, says a lot about how we answer that question.

Like Peter, we may be able respond with our lips, "You are the Christ."

But the best ways to open ourselves to God's transforming power involve spending time with God, and spending time doing his work. Like everything else in life that's worthwhile, these things may take some time. But they do allow God to work with us, more and more.

To start with, classic spiritual disciplines of weekly worship along with daily prayer and bible reading can be VERY helpful.

Also, finding ways of serving others provides great spiritual benefits.

The bottom line, be open to God and his transforming work. Let God mold you and fashion you. Let God take your sand and change it into rock. Let God cement your rocks into relationship with other rocks, as members of the Church, as parts of the body of Christ. And, as part of the church, trust God, step out in faith. For Jesus has promised that the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against his church.