

Prayer for Peace



The following are remarks by Endowments President Grant Oliphant who was among speakers at a major lunchtime community gathering hosted by Mayor William Peduto on Friday August 18, “A Prayer for Pittsburgh: A Prayer for Peace.” The event was held in front of the City-County Building on Grant Street and speakers included faith, civic and ethnic community leaders.

Thank you, Mayor Peduto. And thank you to everyone who has taken the time to be here. I am so lifted by being among you. And this much I know from the work I am privileged to do every day at The Heinz Endowments: We are all lifted by being with each other.

We’ve heard a lot about love today and it’s been beautiful. But we need to remember that love is a verb. Loves requires action to have value. So what is required of us?

The Sufi poet Hafiz, known more for his poems on love and faith, also knew a thing or two about the power of community. In one poem he wrote:

“Out of a great need,
We are all holding hands, and climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen, the terrain around here
Is far too dangerous for that.”

In community we learn that we depend on each other, that we are only as strong as the strength of our relationships with those around us. We learn that community with others feeds us and gives us purpose and shapes who we are. We learn that our differences strengthen us, and that the only thing that can undo us is to let go, to let hatred and bigotry drive us apart.

In dark days, days of struggle and climbing, we cannot afford to be silent or passive or to let go of each other. Had the hate groups marched here today, it would not have been they who worried me most despite all their weaponry and toxic rage.

Far more worrisome would be all those who stood quietly by, saying nothing, who nod their heads in tacit agreement, who tsk-tsk the violence but sympathize with the hate, who imagine they can stay safe or hidden by remaining silent.

My grandmother Maria DeVries worked in the Resistance during the Nazi occupation of her native Amsterdam during World War II. For a year she harbored a young Jewish girl named Nell in her tiny apartment, where she shared a bed with my mother and hid in the daytime behind drawn curtains and locked doors.

When they were finally betrayed, this tiny band of defiant women, it was not at the hands of German agents, but at the hands of Nazi-sympathizing neighborhoods. The rough men who broke into her apartment and dragged Nell away and nearly shot my mother and grandmother were Dutch Nazis, not Germans.

The brutal delusions of hatred are insidious and grow where they are allowed to, wherever they find fertile soil in sympathetic leaders and acquiescent neighbors. We must not give them that soil.

To those tempted to shrug away what they see and remain mute, I would ask them to remember what Gertrude Stein once warned of: “You are so afraid of losing your moral sense that you are not willing to take it through anything more than a mud puddle.”

What good is a moral core if you will not use it? What good is opposing racism, anti-Semitism, hatred in whatever its guise if you will not name it, will not denounce it, and will not oppose it?

We have never been a perfect community or a perfect country. We still have such a long, long way to go to get to a place of justice and true shared freedom. But the idea that we would give up on that journey and instead embrace the darkness is intolerable and we will not do it.

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “There is no way to peace along the way to safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture.”

Out of great need, we are holding hands and climbing. This is dangerous terrain, make no mistake.

But we will not stop loving, and we will not let go. Thank you.