

And They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love

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Introduction to Scripture

The cultural map, often called the purity system, Jesus was born into was clear to everyone. A map of who was in and who was out, who was at the head of the table and who was the servant, who was in the inner circle and who was on the margins. Sort of like a caste system.

According to our gospels, Jesus questioned this cultural map he was born into. Challenged it. Ignored it. Upended it. We know this from the stories about his healing of everyone and his welcoming of everyone to the table and his arguments with the religious leaders of his time.

The Jesus scholar Dominic Crossan writes about Jesus "radical egalitarianism" ... "an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy between them."

Years later, Paul captures this upending of the social map in this unusual and beautiful writing in the letter to the church in Galatia. In this Christian vision, all are one. Listen:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Sermon

I was all prepared to preach about Christian Nationalism this morning. Figuring that it's high time, or even past time, for this subject from this pulpit. To preach about Christian nationalism and how it blatantly contradicts so many Christian values like:

Nonviolence

Welcoming refugees and immigrants. Jesus was a refugee.

Calling out the idolatry of wealth accumulation

Providing for the common good, like universal health care

Radical inclusivity, "everyone is welcome to the table"

Anti-nationalism, this is a global religion.

Yes, I was preparing to debunk Christian nationalism, to proclaim that it is either not Christian at all or a very perverse form of Christianity but then I went to a meeting on Thursday evening about Christian nationalism at Hennepin Ave Methodist Church and heard something convincing. It was a meeting of about 100 people of faith, mostly white, including Minnesota Senator John Marty, son of the renowned American religious scholar Martin Marty and brother to the Editor of Christian Century magazine, Peter Marty, and John himself a committed church goer, who spoke about the growing nationalist actions at the state capital, often hidden in bills coming to a vote..., But it was after we had broken into small groups and then reporting back to the larger group when several people at the microphone said... “this is really, at its heart, white nationalism”

Hmmm. Aha. Revelation!

This movement, some call Christian nationalism, is in its essence, white nationalism. And we should call it what it is.

Is it, once again, clever branding, like the clever branding “family values”, and “prolife”; which the media then latches on to and perhaps inadvertently plays right into their branding strategy thereby shaping our national narrative. We must reject this. Don’t even give them the word “Christian”.

That’s not to say that there aren’t people in that movement who really want a Christian nation. Surely there is a strategic political alliance of groups with varying self interest in that movement, including the Mike Johnson’s, and those against abortion and queer rights and gun violence prevention, and billionaires with a fervent belief in free market capitalism. And with impeccable timing, there is a strong man, a person with profound ego issues, who is brilliantly stoking up the cult of personality, with his personality. Did you see the video in the weekly eblast? Is Donald Trump the puppet of this white nationalist movement or is he the puppeteer? (Oh, what an opera this will make in the future, about this, our time in American history!... Can’t you just hear the strongman singing the MAGA aria?... Make America Great Again... Make America White Again....Make American Great Again...)

But at its heart, the heart of this nationalist movement is the original sin of our country— racism. There is a direct link between the Unite the Right white supremacist rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, from August 2017 and the Jan 6th 2021 riots at the nation’s capital. Let us never forget then president trump’s tweet to his followers on Dec 19 at 1:30 am “Big protest in D.C. on Jan 6. Be there! Will be wild!”

And, do we see now, that there is also a direct link between Donald Trump’s using the words “poisoning the blood of our country” -- referring to those immigrants coming from South America, Africa, and Asia...--- and one of Adolf Hitler’s infamous talking points about the impure

Jewish blood “poisoning” Aryan German blood. Donald Trump has used racist language before, like when he bemoaned that so many immigrants were coming from “s—hole” countries like Haiti and asked why more couldn’t come from countries like Norway....But to use the “blood language” explicitly is particularly provocative and deeply, deeply, deeply disturbing. Its allusion is historically triggering. And who is it triggering in the deep web?

The perverse irony of this so-called Christian nationalism is that Jesus was a brown person and some of the earliest Christian communities were in African countries. In the 4th century, what is now modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea was one of the first regions in the world to adopt Christianity and to help shape it.

And then there is this! It is we American Christians, who are largely to blame for this reactionary movement of white nationalism. Let’s take the blame and do it proudly.... We, Christians, of both the historic black churches and the predominantly white churches variously called mainline, liberal, ecumenical, progressive... we Christians were at the heart of and often the forefront of the anti-slavery movement, the anti-Jim Crowe movement, the civil rights movement, and now the George Floyd reckoning with racism and reparations movement. It is our faithful, courageous Christian ancestors... though always falling short, often painfully unaware of their/or our internalized racism, usually waking up too slowly to the injustice, and only woefully recently understanding how we, who are white, should support and accompany rather than lead... yet still we have been at the heart of the upending of the social map in this country, motivated not by our self-interest but by our faith. Even lifting up this history of our white Christian ancestors can feel cringy and self-aggrandizing, and certainly oversimplifying. But my intent, rather is to remind all of us, black, brown, *and white*-- this is in us. Who we’ve always been, and who we are.

We are Christians who believe more in the social gospel, that we are to work for the kingdom of God on earth, than the personal gospel of individual salvation. We are Christians who have been shaped since childhood with a belief in the social gospel, the upending of the social map of separation and hierarchy, of who belongs where, who belongs in the front of the bus or at a seat at the lunch counter and who belongs in this neighborhood, who belongs in the presidency...We are the social map upending Christians, so imperfect, but still striving to make this happen once and for all in our country; to heal of our original sin. We are the social map upending Christians, the working for the reign of God now Christians, the everyone invited to the table Christians, no exception, the everyone baptized Christians, when the Ethiopian Eunuch says what’s to keep me from being baptized, we say “oh you beloved child of God, come on into the river right now... don’t wait”.. We are the Galatians 3:28 Christians.

But for some reason, some deep reason (sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic... lots of interconnected reasons surely) many of our white siblings find this Jesus inspired upending of the social map deeply threatening.

And so they fought the abolitionist movement with everything they had

And so they fought in the civil war and fought the postwar reconstruction with everything they had... remember the Jim Crow laws and lynchings...

And so they fought the civil rights movement with everything they had.

And so they reacted so strongly to a Black president and it reignited something almost primal...

And so they are fighting the George Floyd anti racism and anti-colonialism movement with everything they have, with laws at the legislature, and trustee pressure at universities, and so much more...

You may be wondering about this Us and Them language. This “othering” of white nationalists. I wonder too. We will never stop loving these siblings and fighting for their economic future, for economic justice for everyone. But we must seek clarity about who they are and how they operate. Fuzziness like silence nests in the banality of evil.

What we are learning is that most of these so called Christian nationalists don't go to church anymore. The word “Christian” functions more as a cultural marker than a religious one. They are receiving their deeply ingrained “theology” or politics from the internet, not from the bible stories or the songs, even in an evangelical church. This is even more troubling, how in the privacy of their own room in the basement of their home, they are being fed ideas of victimhood and vengeance...

All the more reason not to call this movement Christian.

And this movement is extraordinarily dangerous. Yes for our country. For our democracy. For our religion, smearing our name. But also for the lives, the very bodies of our people, black and brown, our people... Muslim and Jewish, our people... LGBTQ , our people... we are one. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, women nor men, black nor white, queer nor straight, abled or disabled... for we are one.

It's a volatile cocktail now. with people feeling the ground shifting under their feet; the upending of the social map... And a certain person, though not sent from God, a kind of messiah figure upon whom religious language and symbols are being projected.... again painful irony, Donald Trump is more like the wannabe emperor who would crucify the messiah!,,,but the dangerous cocktail of people's racist shadow side drawn like a magnet to this strongman... .

The tools they, white nationalists, are using are voter suppression, the outlawing of protests and criminalizing political activism and peaceful mass demonstrations, the increasing threatening intimidation of public figures, legislators, judges, city council and school board members, and sometimes even violence, remember the attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband. Over a third of Republicans now believe that violence may be necessary.

Is this really happening in our country? Yes.

But hear this! This was and is not inevitable. A little over a year ago, thousands of protesters stormed into Brazil's capital with a violent fury and the goal of overturning an election. Sound familiar? Another shocking attack on another western Hemisphere's large democracy. But the leaders on Brazil's right publicly, clearly, unambiguously accepted the results of the election and did exactly what democratic politicians are supposed to do. (Levitsky in article by Nicas). Is it because many Brazilians are old enough to remember the period of authoritarianism starting in the mid-60s and they never want to return to that in their country?

So, what do we do?

Let us channel our ancestors, those who changed the social map, their courage and faithfulness and endurance. They did not just sit on the sidelines and watch, nor should we.

When we hear the language "Christian Nationalism", let's not be afraid to correct the person, to name it what it is. "White Nationalism".

Let us continue to preach and sing about this in worship and to put messages on our electric board, not to be silenced and hide in fear.

Let's continue to organize for economic justice and work with anyone on these goals. Will the resentment fade away as people feel more included in the work of justice and more economically secure?

Let yourself be organized. Come when you are called. When there's an action alert, actually do it. A tabling action, actually do it. A call to come to an action at the capital, actually do it. These are not just feel-good faithful actions; they are always strategic. And when senator John Marty calls for people to be present at a hearing or a vote at the capital, let's go! And if you testify sharing your belief that the US has never been a Christian nation and should never become one, your belief in the separation of Church and state, also be out front about your own Christian identity...saying... "I believe all this *as* a Christian".

Let us show up, and always be grounded in the art of nonviolence, always standing in prayer...

And let us remember that we've done it before, our Christian ancestors in this land, devoted to creating a new social map inspired by our messenger from God, Jesus. We've done it before; we can do it again.

In closing, will you come with me in your imagination to a beautiful homemade wooden kitchen table in a beautiful century old farmhouse on the beautiful farmland in greater MN?

There sits a 30 something young man with his 80 something grandmother, both white.

She's concerned about her grandson. He was a star athlete in high school but had an injury that seemed to hijack his life. To add insult to injury, the company where he worked, made a living wage, moved out of state, even out of country a few years ago.

She sees the bitterness on her beloved grandson's face. But he is also excitedly telling her about what he's been learning on the internet and about a rally he's going to. "It's Christian grandma, you'd like it". he says.

His grandmother, a second generation American from Swedish immigrants, has not done her own anti racism work. She's not read the books. She's not reflected on how this land, she's given her life to, on how it came to her ancestors, and who it was taken from. .

And yet she knows somethings awry... she goes to her Lutheran church every Sunday of her life...She is sad that her grandson no longer goes to church and that he's being fed something else, something they call "Christian". She says to him firmly, while touching his hand with love, "That's not the Jesus I know."

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