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If You See Something, Say Something

By Patrick Anderson, Editor

Luke 23:34a & 35a (RSV): And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do…
35 ***And the people stood by, watching****; but the rulers scoffed at him…*

After the destruction of the events of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security provided signs that were hung in every airport and other public places which said "If You See Something, Say Something."

In hindsight, investigators concluded that sufficient evidence of the impending airplane attacks had existed, but people who had witnessed those signs at the time did not treat them with the urgency that could have prevented the deaths of so many Americans on that bright, cool September morning. Of course, warning signs that appear in hindsight tend to be much more obvious than when seen beforehand.

This Scripture text from the Gospel of Luke is a familiar text that Christians read and hear most often during the season of Holy Week. The first part in verse 34a, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" is well-known and oft-repeated. Jesus was addressing the religious folks, the Pharisees and chief priests, who jeered and laughed at him as he hung on the cross.

Some of those same religious folks had been trolling Jesus for months, trying to catch him on matters of his diet, on which day of the week was sacred, and on to whom a widow who remarried on earth would be married in heaven. They really did not know what they were doing. All they knew was that their political, financial and ecclesiastical dominance was threatened by Jesus.

The Gospel writers give us a great deal of detail about the brutality, the harsh treatment, the taunting and spitting from the crowd. And we accept without much consideration that Jesus, in an intercessory prayer, asked Father God to forgive them.

But the next verse, verse 35a, at least in my experience, does not attract as much notice. Luke says "And the people stood by, watching." The silence of the friends, family and followers of Jesus along with "moderate" Jewish and other observers spoke volumes as they just stood there, saying nothing, just watching. Sufficient evidence of this tragic scene was well-known. The prophets of old had foretold it and Jesus himself had talked about it. The entire episode had been slowly worked out for days as the religious leaders and Roman authorities conspired to kill Jesus.

And the people stood by, watching.

Martin Niemöller

I am reminded of Martin Niemöller, a decorated former WWI German U-Boat Commander and a lifelong member of the largest German Protestant denomination, the Lutheran Evangelicals, in which his father was a prominent minister. He resigned from the military shortly after his wartime heroics and entered seminary. Martin, like most Protestant pastors, was a national conservative, having been raised in a very conservative home. He voted for Nazis in 1924, 1928, and 1933. He welcomed Hitler's accession to power in 1933, believing that it would bring a national revival. Martin Niemöller was a militarist antisemite who responded to Hitler's call of "national regeneration"—Nazi Germany's own version of MAGA. When later asked by his cellmate at Dachau Concentration Camp about why he had supported the Nazi Regime, Niemöller said:

> I wonder about it as much as I regret it. Still, it is true that Hitler betrayed me. I had an audience with him, as a representative of the Protestant Church, shortly before he became Chancellor, in 1932. Hitler promised me on his word of honor, to protect the Church, and not to issue any anti-Church laws. He also agreed not to allow pogroms against the Jews, assuring me as follows: "There will be restrictions against the

The silence of the friends, family and followers of Jesus along with "moderate" Jewish and other observers spoke volumes as they just stood there, saying nothing, just watching.

Jews, but there will be no ghettos, no pogroms, in Germany." I believed him…. I am paying for that mistake now; and not me alone, but thousands of other persons like me."

As Hitler's attacks shifted from Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals toward the Protestants, Niemöller turned against the regime and spoke out publicly against fascism, while still holding on to his antisemitic views. In 1937, as he became more agitated and outspoken about fascist Nazism, he was arrested, tried and shipped off to spend the next eight years in concentration camps. He suffered in Dachau until he was rescued by Allied soldiers who freed the concentration camp prisoners in 1945, just a few weeks after another Christian minister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged as a prisoner of the Gestapo.

After the war, in the fall of 1945, Martin Niemöller and his wife, Else, visited Dachau. He showed his wife the cell in which he had been confined for so many months; they passed the crematorium where a great white-painted board had been affixed to a tree. On it, in black letters, they read: "Here between the years 1933 and 1945, 238,756 human beings were incinerated."

At that moment, Niemöller would later tell his audiences in numerous speeches, sermons and lectures for the rest of his life, the consciousness of his own guilt and his own failure assailed him as never before.

> "And God asked me… 'Man, where wast thou in those years 1933 to 1945?' I knew I had no answer to that question. True, I had an alibi in my pocket, for the years 1937 to 1945, my identity disc from the concentration camp. But what help to me was that? God was not asking me where I had been from 1937 to 1945… and for the years 1933 to 1937, I had no answer."

The most famous words of Martin Niemöller are these:

> *First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—*
> *Because I was not a Communist.*
> *Then they came for the social democrats, and I did not speak out—*
> *Because I was not a social democrat.*
> *Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—*
> *Because I was not a trade unionist.*
> *Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—*
> *Because I was not a Jew.*
> *Then they came for me—*
> *and there was no one left to speak for me.*

And the people stood by, watching.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and several others were arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, on the charges of "parading without a permit." This was neither the first nor last time Martin found himself in the custody of southern police. He was placed in a solitary cell where he obtained a copy of a public letter from Birmingham's religious leaders, opposing the public protests about white supremacy and racial injustice. These church leaders—from Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic and Jewish traditions—advised that "when rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets."

In response, King wrote what became, alongside Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, one of the finest examples of moral justification for the equality of humans. His immediate situation in a jail cell led him to address the complicity of White Christians in the awful sin of racial injustice. In that letter he wrote:

Upon seeing something, they said something; they did something. One was on the scene, sharing the unjust treatment, and died young; the other was on the scene but did not share the injustice and waited too long to speak up and act out.

> "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities…
> "When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind

the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows. "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust."

Martin Niemöller in fascist Germany and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Jim Crow America saw something wrong in their cultures and in the church. Niemöller saw something mostly in retrospect, remained mostly silent, and lived to the age of 92 in reflection, remorse, and repentance. King experienced and opposed what he saw while it was happening and was a victim, his life ended by a murderer's bullet at the age of 39. Upon seeing something, they said something; they did something. One was on the scene, sharing the unjust treatment, and died young; the other was on the scene but did not share the injustice and waited too long to speak up and act out.

Persecuted people organize their faith around encountering God in their struggles for freedom and justice in the here and now and in doing so, they cannot just stand by and watch. Traditional theologians and church leaders tend to extol the vision of the hereafter, looking for freedom and justice in the afterlife while silently watching in the here and now. They tout fantastical propositions of narrowly defined theological orthodoxy while misunderstanding the prayer so often recited, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

The white church has long been told that social problems, political issues and controversial subjects do not belong in church, and need not be discussed in holy places. We must not divide the church is the mantra. But the message of Jesus of Nazareth is to do exactly that.

As I see it, the biggest challenge we face in the white church is the impulse many of us white Christians have to avoid conflict at any cost and by any means necessary. The white church has long been told that social problems, political issues and controversial subjects do not belong in church, and need not be discussed in holy places. We must not divide the church is the mantra. But the message of Jesus of Nazareth is to do exactly that. The acceptance of a white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, with the threat of violence to force compliance from those who suffer under that narrative, is considered orthodox, normal and ideal.

Meanwhile Jesus aligns himself with the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalized and against such political and ecclesiastical domination and superiority. ■

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Gut-wrenching Love: What a Fresh Look at the 'Good Samaritan' Story Says for Ethics Today

By Meghan Sullivan

The Bible story of the Good Samaritan is more than a mainstay of Sunday school courses. "Good Samaritan" is the catch-all way to describe a do-gooder – someone who stops to change the tire of a stranded motorist, helps a lost child find his parents in a store and gives money to disaster relief programs.

But as an ethicist, I'd argue that the parable's moral vision is much more radical than merely advising people to help out when they can. The parable raises profound philosophical questions about what it means to love another person, and our sometimes-astonishing capacity to feel connected to others.

Love thy neighbor

The parable of the Good Samaritan occurs in the Gospel of Luke, in a part of the Bible where Jesus is attracting followers and preparing them to spread his movement.

During one of these sessions, a religious scholar asks him to explain the fundamental commandment in Jewish ethics: "You will love God with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of your strength. And you will love your neighbor as yourself." In response, Jesus tells the now-iconic story:

One time a man was traveling down the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Bible describes absolutely nothing else about this man, but the tradition assumes he is Jewish. The man was attacked and beaten within an inch of his life. As he lay in a ditch, a temple priest and a temple functionary both noticed him, but hurried past.

Then a member of another tribe, a Samaritan, saw him. The Samaritan was immediately moved and rushed over, hoisted the man onto his donkey, took him to a nearby inn and stayed up with him all night, nursing him back to life. The next morning, he paid the innkeeper two denarii – Roman silver coins, about two days' salary – and offered to pay the tab for anything else the man might require as he recuperated.

Jesus turns the question back to the scholar: Who loved their neighbor? The scholar concedes the point – the Samaritan who had mercy.

"Go and do likewise," Jesus replies.

What exactly did the Samaritan do that reveals the core of the love ethic? Jesus says specifically that the Samaritan's "guts churned" when he saw the man in need: the Greek word used in the text is "splagchnizomai." The term occurs in other places in the Gospels, evoking a very physical kind of emotional response. This "gut-wrenching love" is spontaneous and visceral.

Mortal and immortal

Ancient philosophers spent plenty of time trying to understand the ways humans love, often using highly intellectual frames. "The Symposium," a dialogue by Plato, depicts Socrates drunkenly debating the essence of erotic love with his friends. Aristotle beautifully theorizes about friendship, "philia," in his teachings about ethics. He introduces the idea that when we truly love a friend, we think of them as our "second self" – the lives of your closest friends become entangled within your own.

Jesus says specifically that the Samaritan's "guts churned" when he saw the man in need: the Greek word used in the text is "splagchnizomai." The term occurs in other places in the Gospels, evoking a very physical kind of emotional response. This "gut-wrenching love" is spontaneous and visceral.

Many of the early Christian philosophers debated the nature of "agape," the Greek word the New Testament uses to describe the selfless, unconditional love that characterizes the very nature of God. Saint Augustine introduced the concept of "amoris ordo," the order of loves: that morality compels someone to first love the highest good, which is God, and then organize the rest of their loves to serve this highest love.

These concepts present love as an intellectual attitude that is often reserved for a select group, such as God, or one's family, or one's countrymen. And

Christian notions of "agape" specifically put love just out of reach, possible only for a divine being, though humans should aspire to it and can experience its effects.

*Splagchnizomai i*s different; such a physical emotion is only possible for creatures like us, with bodies. And as the parable of the Good Samaritan shows, it is an emotion that can be triggered by anyone, at any time, if we are – like the Samaritan – ready to be so moved.

Love and modern moral thinking

Much like their ancient counterparts, philosophers of the past century have struggled to explain how love can be one of the most morally significant elements of our lives, while also being so extraordinarily partial, biased and seemingly arbitrary.

To resolve the tension, many treat love not as a source of insight, but as a messy feature of human psychology – an impediment that ethical reasoning must navigate around.

Indeed, the most prominent recent movements in applied ethics are wholly oriented around rational efficiency. The Effective Altruism movement argues that people should use evidence to transform themselves into the most efficient do-gooders they can possibly be. Proponents discourage college graduates looking to make a difference from pursuing public service and recommend high-paying jobs instead, arguing that they can have a bigger impact giving away wealth than directly caring for others. Emotions are viewed with suspicion, as sources of potential bias not sources of moral wisdom.

In the book *Against Empathy*, psychologist Paul Bloom warns that such emotions "do poorly in a world where there are many people in need and where the effects of one's actions are diffuse, often delayed, and difficult to compute."

Compare that to the parable of the Good Samaritan, which portrays ethics as an emotional, deeply personal and almost absurdly inefficient matter. Those two denarii were a weighty sum – they could have been used to beef up security on the road and prevent other robberies, rather than save a single man. Nor did the Samaritan off-load the injured man onto a local healer. He cared for him directly, the way someone might sit with a gravely ill family member.

Neighbors and fences

In Jesus' time, as in our own, there was significant debate about how to understand the commandments to love one's neighbor. One school of thought considered a "neighbor" to be a member of your community: The Book of Leviticus says not to hold grudges against fellow countrymen. Another school held that you were obligated to love even strangers who are only temporarily traveling in your land. Leviticus also declares that, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself."

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus seems to come down on the side of the broadest possible application of the love ethic. And by emphasizing a particular type of love – the gut-wrenching kind – Jesus seems to indicate that the way of progress in ethics is through emotions, rather than around them.

My current work focuses on the upshots of reading this parable as a philosophical guide to ethics in our own time. For instance, if the love ethic is right, preparing students to make progress on complex social issues requires more than cost-benefit analysis. It also requires helping them to recognize and cultivate emotions, especially loving compassion.

There are clear parallels between the original parable of the Good Samaritan and pressing political issues today, especially migration – and also, I believe, polarization. His story calls closer attention to humans' innate capacity to love beyond the limits of familiar relationships or "tribes" – and just how much is lost when we do not.

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New Apostolic Reformation: Evangelicals See Trump as God's Warrior in Their Battle to Win America from Satanic Forces and to Christianize It

By Art Jipson

A growing movement believes President-elect Donald Trump is fighting a spiritual war against demonic forces within the United States. Trump himself stated in his acceptance speech on Nov. 6, 2024, that the reason that "God spared my life" was to "restore America to greatness."

I have studied various religious movements that seek to shape and control American society. One of these is the New Apostolic Reformation, or NAR, whose followers believe that they are waging a spiritual battle for control of the United States. NAR is an offshoot of Protestant Christian evangelicalism. NAR advocates claim they receive divine guidance in reconstructing modern society based on Christian spiritual beliefs.

In 2015, an estimated three million adult Americans attended churches that were openly part of NAR. Some scholars estimate that the number of active NAR adherents may be larger, as the movement may include members of Protestant Christian churches that are not directly aligned with the NAR movement.

The beginning of the movement

NAR emerged in the late 1990s when theologian C. Peter Wagner popularized the term "New Apostolic Reformation." Wagner argued that God was creating modern-day apostles and prophets who would lead Christianity in remaking American society.

The roots of the New Apostolic Reformation can be traced to the broader charismatic movement that sees spiritual forces as an active part of everyday life. This view does not separate sacred experience from regular everyday life. For the much larger network of charismatic Christians and Pentecostal movements that emphasize a personal relationship with God, the world is full of the active presence of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts and direct divine experiences.

Core beliefs

Central to NAR is the belief that Christian religious leaders should be the main source of cultural and political authority in America.

NAR proponents argue that select leaders receive direct revelation from God, guiding the direction of churches and fighting spiritual warfare against demonic influences, which they believe corrupt the behavior of individuals and nations.

NAR advocates for a hierarchical structure in which religious leaders and their political allies hold authority in society.

Central to NAR is the belief that Christian religious leaders should be the main source of cultural and political authority in America.

They believe in the "Seven Mountains Mandate," a way to represent Christian control of society through a strategy that Christians should infiltrate, influence and eventually control seven key areas in society – business, government, media, arts and entertainment, education, family and religion – to bring about cultural transformation.

By doing so, NAR proponents believe they can establish a pure and true form of what they believe is a society ruled by divine guidance and strict adherence to biblical ideas.

Lance Wallnau, a prominent Christian author, speaker, social media influencer and consultant associated with NAR, has promoted the idea that such engagement where NAR Christian leaders hold authority through a government tied to divine will is essential for advancing societal transformation. Wallnau has been a vocal supporter of Trump, viewing him as a significant figure in NAR's vision.

Spiritual warfare

Followers of NAR believe that they must engage

in spiritual warfare, which includes prayers and actions aimed at combating perceived demonic influences in society.

This practice often involves identifying "strongholds" of evil, around cultural issues, such as gay marriage, transgender rights and LGBTQ+ activism, and then working to dismantle them. An example of this is a recent series of religious-based political rallies led by NAR leaders known as "The Courage Tour" that advocated directly for Trump's second election.

The NAR emphasizes that Christians should expect to see miraculous signs, where extraordinary events, such as Trump's survival of an assassination attempt, are interpreted to be explained only by divine or spiritual intervention.

The movement's adherents also believe in faith-based healing and supernatural experiences, such as prophetic utterances and speech.

Trump as divinely ordained

Many NAR leaders and followers support Trump, viewing him as a divinely appointed figure who would facilitate NAR's goals for societal reconstruction, believing he was chosen by God to fulfill a prophetic destiny.

They position Trump as a warrior against a so-called demonically controlled – and therefore corrupted – "deep state," aligning with NAR's emphasis on spiritual warfare and cultural dominion as outlined in the "Seven Mountains" mandate. NAR leaders followed Trump's understanding of a corrupt government.

The NAR led a "Million Women" worship rally on Oct. 12, 2024, in Washington, D.C., in which the organizers sought to encourage one million women NAR adherents to come to pray, protest and support Trump's campaign. The event was promoted as a "last stand moment" to save the nation by helping Trump win the election as a champion against dark, satanic forces. Several prominent politicians, legislators and members of the judiciary, such as House Speaker Mike Johnson and Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, have flown the NAR-based "Appeal to Heaven" flag.

For NAR evangelicals, the presidential election is interpreted through a Christian apocalyptic rhetoric. In this rhetoric, one candidate is a force for good, a warrior for God – Trump – and the other is led by demonic forces, such as Harris. Trump's 2024 win is seen as a critical moment of spiritual warfare where the forces of God defeat the forces of evil.

Criticism from many Christian denominations

Despite its growing popularity, NAR faces substantial criticism. Many mainstream Christian churches argue that the movement's teachings deviate from traditional Christian orthodoxy. Critics highlight abuse of authority by people who claim God is directing their actions and the potential for abuse of authority by those claiming apostolic roles. The embrace of Trump raises concerns about blending evangelical faith and political ambition.

Critics argue that the NAR's support for Trump compromised the integrity of the gospel, prioritizing political power over spiritual integrity. The events surrounding the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol further complicated this relationship, exposing the potential dangers of conflating religious beliefs with partisan politics.

Moreover, the NAR's emphasis on spiritual warfare and the idea of taking control over society has raised other Christian groups' concerns about its potential to foster an "us versus them" mentality, leading to increased polarization within society.

Critics highlight abuse of authority by people who claim God is directing their actions and the potential for abuse of authority by those claiming apostolic roles. The embrace of Trump raises concerns about blending evangelical faith and political ambition.

The New Apostolic Reformation represents a significant development, blending charismatic practices with a strong emphasis on politics and cultural transformation.

However, a large majority of Americans disagree that society should be remade based on religious theology. Thus, for now, the NAR movement's fundamental views about religion and government are starkly at odds with most Americans. ■

Art Jipson is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Dayton. *This essay first appeared in The Conversation on Feb 22, 2025 and is reprinted with permission of the author.*

Brave Faith and Corporate Courage: Speaking Truth to Power

By Charles Kiker

The mission statement of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, an inclusive, racially diverse, welcoming and affirming, justice-oriented congregation states:

> *We are working to create a church and world where all people are welcome and belong in the beloved community of God. Through the ministries of worship, education, compassion and advocacy, Broadway provides a place of grace, beauty, sanctuary, inclusivity, and brave faith.*

What is "brave faith"? Are brave people fearless? I don't think so. Brave people of faith press on, even when scared. Example: In a church where I was pastor, a young single woman came to my office saying she would like to be a member of our church in the traditional Baptist method of "transfer of letter." She had been a member of another Baptist church, but was sure they would not send her letter, since she had been dismissed by that church. We accepted her on the basis of her testimony of faith.

She came to me a few weeks later saying she had moved into an apartment over a bar, and the bar owner was pressuring her for sexual favors in lieu of rent payment. Would I speak to him about that? I was not eager to go there on such a mission. But I did. It was not my custom to wear a coat and tie to the office or on pastoral calls. But on that day, I put on a suit and tie, and carried a big black Bible.

On a morning late enough for the bar to be open, but early enough that there was not likely to be many patrons, I went to the bar. I was apprehensive. I went in, seated myself on a bar stool, and asked the bartender if I might speak to the owner. He said, "That's me." I told him why I was there, and he turned white as a sheet. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, "and I promise it will not happen again." He was more afraid of me than I of him. Actually, he was not afraid of me since I posed no physical threat to him. I believe he feared the One I represented. Brave faith on that day may have been beneficial to the young woman, but individual brave faith without corporate courage did not change the culture of that time and place.

Another example is found in Friends of Justice in the struggle to overturn the Tulia Drug Sting. In the early morning hours of July 23, 1999, in the overwhelmingly white town of Tulia, Texas, with a population of approximately 5,000, 39 people were arrested and charged with selling powder cocaine, a charge which later was determined to be a made-up fantasy of a dishonest cop. Thirty-three of those 39 were people of color. Friends of Justice was born out of the injustice of that event. An attorney advised us that if we openly opposed the sting, the authorities or their minions might come after us. We did, and they did.

One of the FOJ leader's car brakes failed. The line was cut, with a knife, the mechanic said. There was a war of intimidation and veiled threat against us. Police regularly patrolled the street by our meeting place on the Sunday evenings we met. One of our leaders lived in Lubbock and was regularly stopped by the police on his way home. "Just a courtesy stop," one patrolman told him. Yeah, sure!

On July 22, 2001, the day before the second anniversary of the infamous Tulia Drug Sting, Friends of Justice organized a "Never Again" rally. About 150 people came, some representing justice-friendly organizations in Amarillo, a busload of young people from Austin, a keynote speaker from Nashville, Tennessee, one couple from North Carolina, Ken and Nancy Sehested. Nancy Sehested did herself proud as one of the speakers at the event.

By midnight, all the speakers and responders had had their say, and we began marching the five blocks to the county jail. Local law enforcement had requested Texas DPS presence and local police from surrounding towns and counties–just in case a riot broke out. At every intersection police cars were parked, blue lights blinking, some with sirens sounding. The marchers were singing, "We Shall Overcome." I was walking next to the keynote speaker, a big, burly man, maybe 6'5" with a breadth to match his height. We came to the verse, "We are not afraid." I looked up at him and said, "Actually, I'm scared s–tless."

But the path was set, and we kept marching. The plan was to march to and around the county jail, singing "We Shall Overcome!" When we got within a block of the jail, we saw that the sheriff and several deputies were blocking the path. Alan Bean, CEO of Friends of Justice, was leading the way. He veered

off to the right, led us up the west steps of the courthouse, where Lydia Bean sang, "How Can I Keep from Singing." Alan led us in a prayer and we dispersed.

Alan wisely avoided any physical confrontation with law enforcement. That was brave faith, accompanied by corporate courage. Brave faith/corporate courage overcame fear. There was brave faith in the leadership of Friends of Justice. There was corporate courage in the organization, and in our reaching out to other organizations such as the ACLU Texas, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, newspapers including major papers from California to New York. The upshot of it was that on April 1, 2003, the judge for the evidentiary hearings announced that the testimony under oath of undercover agent Tom Coleman as simply not credible. Since his testimony was the only evidence against the defendants, the judge decreed the convictions of all the defendants in the Swisher County Court on the basis of his testimony should be reversed. The Texas Court of Appeals approved the judge's recommendation, and the governor of Texas cleansed the records of the exonerated.

This happened through brave faith and multiple forms of corporate courage, including a ragtag bunch of rural rebels named Friends of Justice–as the prosecutorial powers viewed Friends of Justice–, the ACLU, the Legal Defense Fund of NAACP, and coast-to-coast major press coverage. The judge presiding over the evidentiary hearings told me that the undoing of the Tulia fiasco was the result of a "perfect storm" (his words) and that the work of Friends of Justice was absolutely essential to the outcome.

The events of the Tulia Drug Sting unfolded in the closing years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. For a detailed treatment of these events, see *Taking Out the Trash in Tulia, Texas,* by Alan Bean. Did Friends of Justice's opposition to the Tulia Drug Sting reverse the incarceration pattern of what has been described by Michelle Alexander as a new Jim Crow? (See her book: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.*) Not yet. Mass incarceration is still the order of the day. And it is still weighted against people of color. But it did accomplish a measure of justice for the Tulia accused. It did result in a Texas law requiring corroboration of witness testimony. However, aggressive law enforcement lobbying forced an amendment to the law exempting law officer testimony from corroboration. And that law required drug evidence to be analyzed. The Tulia fiasco resulted in the dissolution of regional drug task forces in the state of Texas. That was then, this is now.

Broadway Baptist Church, by formal vote of the congregation, has pledged to work for the *creation of a church and world where all people are welcome and belong to the beloved community of God. Through the ministries of worship, education, compassion and advocacy, Broadway provides a place of grace, beauty, sanctuary, inclusivity, and brave faith.*

Congregational brave faith has become corporate courage. We see evidence of this corporate courage through our ACT Council (Acknowledge, Confess, Transform), and through our Justice Committee. We are creating a more faithful church and a better world, starting in Tarrant County. The Tarrant County jail ranks at or near the top of Texas jails for the number of prisoners dying while incarcerated. Broadway's pastor, Ryon Price, and representatives from the Justice Committee regularly attend the twice monthly meetings of the Court, and are allowed to address the Court and shine a light on jail deaths and prisoner mistreatment. These church members are not always welcome. At one meeting, a jail official responded to the church members that since the Broadway speakers were not under oath, what they say is not necessarily the truth. Senior Pastor Ryon Price, in many ways the embodiment of Brave Faith, reminded the court that people from Broadway do not have to be under oath to speak the truth. He elicited a mild apology from the accuser.

More importantly, the press attends these meetings, and reports what happens there. There have been efforts to stifle the truth. A political leader who does not like what is coming from Broadway published a libelous social media article attacking Broadway. On one occasion, the pastor was allotted three minutes to speak at Commissioners Court. He was concluding at three minutes and eight seconds and was cut off, marched out of the court by a bailiff, and banned from further attendance at the court. The problem was more what was said in the 180 seconds than the eight second violation. Following a letter from Broadway's legal counsel, the ban was rescinded. Through the brave faith leadership of Pastor Ryon Price, Broadway is exercising corporate courage, and speaking truth to power.

May our tribe expand. ■

Charles Kiker is a retired American Baptist pastor, a scholar-teacher member of Broadway Baptist Church and contributes frequently to Christian Ethics Today.

Stop Using the Bible to Dehumanize Transgender People

By Serene Jones

A state senator in Oklahoma recently proposed a bill that would ban people under the age of 26 from receiving gender-affirming care—launching a massive, aggressive attack on the transgender community. The move sends a clear signal that anti-trans leaders are gearing up to be even bolder and more combative in their crusade.

As with the mountain of other anti-trans legislation sweeping the nation, this new bill is based on so-called Christian views. Even the name, the "Millstone Act of 2023," alludes to a Bible passage that m for those who cause children to sin to be drowned.

As a Christian theologian, a minister, and the president of a seminary with many transgender students, I am horrified by the continued use of Christianity and the Bible to viciously attack the transgender community. The Bible never said that being transgender is wrong. This extremist, wrong-headed belief is simply based on shaky extrapolations of the text.

In contrast, nearly every page of the Bible tells us that we must love and care for one another, not degrade and harm each other. This message of love and care is clear, not a false extrapolation. But in this legislative onslaught, a biblically false hate-message is the prized weapon of attack.

The new Oklahoma legislation was proposed by State Senator David Bullard, a conservative "Christian" who consistently references the Bible in legislative work. Last year, he used these false biblical interpretations to spearhead a law requiring public school students to use bathrooms that match their biological sex. Is this actually in the Bible? No.

Meanwhile, in Texas, State Representative Steve Toth—an ordained pastor—recently proposed a bill that would make it a second-degree felony to provide gender-affirming care for minors. He has referred to being transgender as a "spiritual problem" and called on pastors to use their pulpits to speak against transgender rights. Is this really a biblical mandate? No.

And in Tennessee, State Representative William Lamberth—a staunch "Christian"— introduced a similar bill barring minors from accessing gender-affirming treatment, claiming such health services are "profoundly unethical and morally wrong." Can these policies be supported biblically? Absolutely not.

Frighteningly, these efforts are just the tip of the iceberg. Far-right Christian politicians in states nationwide are continuing to find new ways to demean transgender people. There's no end in sight.

It is deeply disturbing that the monstrous anti-trans crusade is based on assumptions drawn from two main sections of biblical text. Some claim that in Genesis, God explicitly created two biologically different genders that cannot be changed or reimagined and should follow strict rules around gender comportment—mainly that males head all households. Others refer to a passage in Deuteronomy that prohibits people from wearing clothes of the opposite gender. Should we now forbid females to wear pants? Or throw all females who head households into jail? Of course not. Most people we know would be arrested immediately if we followed such views. But we do not do this, which calls us to ask: Why the ardent, vicious attack on transgender people?

As a Christian theologian, a minister, and the president of a seminary with many transgender students, I am horrified by the continued use of Christianity and the Bible to viciously attack the transgender community.

In the same vein, the Bible also includes sections that support gender fluidity. For example, while God is typically described with "He" pronouns, Isaiah offers comparisons of God to a woman in childbirth. There are also several instances in which God is compared to a mother bird protecting her children. Why are these passages never lifted up in legislative sessions?

The reality is, the Bible leaves a lot to interpretation. It's easy to cherry-pick sentences and warp them for a political agenda. There are also plenty of passages that Christians clearly reject like, amusingly, warnings to not wear clothing with two types of material. And there are other morally abhorrent passages that are

fiercely rejected, like those supporting enslavement and condoning violence against women.

Ultimately, when we look to the Bible for guidance, we have to look at its overarching lessons: Love others. Treat our neighbors with respect. Show compassion.

That means respecting, embracing and loving transgender people.

At its core, the anti-trans movement is all based on wild interpretations of a few Bible passages. To those who use the Bible this way and misuse Christian beliefs, it's time to stop. We must move past this dangerous hate-messaging and embrace the core tenets of God's word. ■

Ultimately, when we look to the Bible for guidance, we have to look at its overarching lessons: Love others. Treat our neighbors with respect. Show compassion.

The Rev. Dr. Serene Jones is the 16th president of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, the first woman to be president in the school's 182-year history. She is a leading public theologian who contributes to scholarly and national discussions on matters of faith, social justice and political life. She holds a B.A. from the University of Oklahoma and a Ph.D. from Yale University. Jones is ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ and is the author of several books, including Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety (Westminster John Knox, 1995) and Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace (Fortress, 2000). Her latest is a memoir, Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World, released this year. An earlier version of this essay appeared in Newsweek and is published here with permission of the author.

Trans Children Are God's Gifts

Without the support of our Christian church in the Houston suburbs, my daughter might not be with us today…

As painful as it is that the most hateful among us are often my fellow Christians, their ignorance only makes me more resolute to fight for trans kids like my daughter. I will never stop speaking the truth, and the plain truth is that God's love is so much bigger than anything we can imagine. It is a transformative gift intended for all of us, and it should be shared with everyone.

Source: Molly Carnes, a vocational evangelist and LGBTQ+ advocate in Texas, in her article in *The Texas Observer*, February 3, 2025.

Trump's Two Religions: The Prayer Breakfast and the Executive Order

By John Hawthorne

President Trump spoke recently at the National Prayer Breakfast and followed that with a speech at the Washington Hilton to assembled followers. Later that afternoon, he signed an executive order (EO).

Reading the news today about Trump's addresses and the EO, I was struck by two very different visions of American religion he offered.

I made a rough transcription of the Hilton speech.[1] What I found were two very different versions of religion: a civil religion that would make Robert Bellah proud and one that defines the nation as a whole, and a Manichean view of religion where "they" are always out to get the true and faithful Christians.

He seemed to shift seamlessly[2] from one to the other. Here's an example of the civil religion introduction:

> "After years of decline Americans are reasserting our true identity as a people ordained by God to be the freest and most exceptional nation ever to exist on the face of this earth. We weren't that for four years. I don't believe we were. And we're getting there very soon and we'll be able to say it again as I said in my inaugural address two weeks ago. A light is now shining over the world and I'm hearing it from other leaders that have traditionally not been on our side, that there's so much more good feeling in the air, so different than it was just a short time ago. Because here in America we believe in ourselves, we believe in our destiny and trust in the providence of Almighty God."

This sentiment has probably been shared by every president at every prayer breakfast since the first one under Eisenhower in 1953. I think this is where Trump is most comfortable. I think back to the famous Liberty University "Two Corinthians" speech where he quoted the verse about liberty and said "that's the whole ballgame, isn't it." It fits with his Norman Vincent Peale upbringing.

Yet he immediately follows the civil religion sentiment with this:

> "I can tell you the opposite side, the opposing side and they oppose religion, they oppose God, they've lost confidence."

After some tangents on fixing the Middle East, complaining about Ukraine and Russia, and recognizing released hostages held by Hamas, he was back to civil religion.

> "These events remind us how blessed we are to live in a nation that has thrived for two-and-a-half centuries as a haven of religious freedom, although I will tell you the last four years have been very difficult. It would have been a very difficult thing for me to make that statement if this speech was taking place two years ago. My administration is absolutely committed to defending this proud heritage and I will always protect religious liberty."

What I found were two very different versions of religion: a civil religion that would make Robert Bellah proud and one that defines the nation as a whole, and a Manichean view of religion where "they" are always out to get the true and faithful Christians.

So, we get the blessings of providence that he will always protect, sandwiched around a vague reference to the difficulties of the past four years (ignoring the Catholic president and Baptist vice-president and the office of faith outreach).

But this speech was needed to set the table for the following executive order; so he had to maximize the largely imagined and anecdotal damage done by the Biden administration:

"Today, I'm announcing that I will be creating a brand-new presidential commission on religious liberty. It's going to be a very big deal which will work tirelessly to uphold this most fundamental right. Unfortunately, in recent years we've seen this sacred liberty threatened like never before in American history. There's nothing happened like the last four years what's so many things have gone bad for religion. What they've done and the persecution that they've

executed have been just horrible. For example, most of us would not have believed it possible that a grandmother with a severe medical condition, a quite elderly woman, would be put in jail for praying here in America. She was put in jail as she was praying outside a clinic."

She and others, while praying, had been blocking the entrance to an abortion clinic — which is, in fact, against a federal law that has been on the books for over 20 years. Trump pardoned her on the first day. But she was a cause among conservative religious leaders and politicians who had been lobbying for her pardon.

She works as an example of Trump's second kind of religion. The one where anything that doesn't give broad license to conservative Christians is anti-religion (and anti-God). Here's how he describes the purpose of the task force.

> "To confront such weaponization and religious persecution today, I am signing an executive order to make our attorney general … the head of a task force brand new to eradicate anti-Christian bias -- about time, right – anti-Christian bias. The mission of this task force will be to immediately halt all forms of anti-Christian targeting and discrimination within the federal government including at the DOJ, which was absolutely terrible, the IRS, the FBI, and other agencies. In addition, the task force will work to prosecute anti-Christian violence and vandalism in our society and to move heaven and earth to defend the rights of Christians and religious believers nationwide. If we don't have religious liberty then we don't have a free country. We probably don't even have a country."

Toward the end of his remarks (which were followed by long tangents on the assassination attempt, the North Carolina hurricane/FEMA complaints, and the California Fires/Water release), he returned to civil religion language, but begins the imagined anti-religion crowd:

"Throughout history, those who have sought control and domination over others have always tried to cut the people off from the connection to their creator. At the same time every nation with big dreams and great ambition has recognized that there is no resource more precious than faith in the hearts of our people. It's the thing that makes our nation great. It makes other nations great when you don't have it you don't see great nations."

These remarks made me think immediately of PRRI data on how white evangelicals believe Christians are discriminated against more than any other subgroup in society. They believe that because they get a steady diet of anecdotes (often taken out of context) about someone, somewhere, who was called a homophobe.

It's also consistent with the recent PRRI data on Christian nationalism. While nation-wide, only three in 10 respondents were either adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism, the figure for White evangelicals was over six in 10 (and almost that for Hispanic Protestants). The fact that America is not recognized as a Christian nation may be seen as discrimination by the adherents.

The executive order itself doesn't bother with flowery language about civil religion.

> "It is the policy of the United States, and the purpose of this order, to protect the religious freedoms of Americans and end the anti-Christian weaponization of government. The Founders established a nation in which people were free to practice their faith without fear of discrimination or retaliation by their government. My administration will not tolerate anti-Christian weaponization of government or unlawful conduct targeting Christians. The law protects the freedom of Americans and groups of Americans to practice their faith in peace, and my administration will enforce the law and protect these freedoms. My administration will ensure that any unlawful and improper conduct, policies, or practices that target Christians are identified, terminated, and rectified."

While nation-wide, only three in 10 respondents were either adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism, the figure for White evangelicals was over six in 10 (and almost that for Hispanic Protestants).

The contrast between the two versions of religion couldn't be more stark. On the one hand, a vague sense of belief or faith in Providence is what makes countries great. On the other, the primary concern about violation of religious freedom protections extends only to Christians (which by example means conservative Christians).

It's worth noting that the Roberts court has been remarkably friendly to conservative Christians. The speaker of the house is himself a conservative

Christian who worked for a Christian legal organization. The senate majority leader graduated from a Christian university. And now the executive branch has come to the rescue.

I was going to also quote extensively from Trump's official remarks at the actual breakfast event. It starts with Winthrop's "city on a hill" and Williams' quest for religious freedom (which Winthrop's people didn't like, as I remember), talks about Billy Graham, and then meanders through the assassination, the plane crash, his plan for a statuary garden, crime and immigration. But he ends like this.

> "And God bless everybody. We want to come together. And the happiest — the person, the element, the everything that's going to be happy. People of religion are going to be happy again. And I really believe you can't be happy without religion, without that belief. I really believe it. I just don't see how you can be (applause). So, let's bring religion back. Let's bring God back into our lives."

I don't know how to reconcile these two versions of religion. My suspicion is that he prefers the civil religion language, but his people want the Christian persecution language because it keeps the base happy. The latter also feeds his transactionalism. But he moves so quickly between "the city on the hill" and "you're all going to die without me" that I get whiplash.

I'll be over here waiting for the other executive orders protecting the religious freedom of Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, and Nones. But I won't be holding my breath. ■

John Hawthorne writes John's Newsletter at johnhawthorne@substack.com *This post was from February 7, 2025 and is reprinted here with the author's permission.*

Why You Should Read, Share, Support, and Contribute to Christian Ethics Today

In order to be an effective, progressive, prophetic voice for Christian ethics, this quarterly journal, Christian Ethics Today, works from the broad center of the Christian faith.

We draw upon Christian experience, biblical truth, church traditions, and current research in ethics, addressing readers at both the intellectual and emotional levels.

Honoring the insight of Baptists and others that the best way to provide all citizens in a diverse society with maximal religious liberty is to maintain a separation of church and state.

We support Christian ecumenism and inclusivism by seeking contributors and readers from a broad range of contributors and readers.

Enforcement of Immigration Laws in Churches and Schools

By Laura E. Alexander

Whether Christians should prioritize care for migrants as much as for fellow citizens has been debated for centuries

Vice President J.D. Vance and several bishops of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church are having a war of words over the Trump administration's flurry of executive orders and highly publicized immigration raids. The bishops argue that these policies tend to empower gangs and traffickers while harming vulnerable families; Vance has criticized the bishops' stance and argued that crackdowns are a matter of public safety.

In the wake of President Donald Trump's executive orders, both Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Migration, publicly objected to the tone and the humanitarian impacts of the orders.

Seitz critiqued generalizations that denigrate and describe migrants without legal status as "criminals" or "invaders," saying this "is an affront to God, who has created each of us in his own image." Instead, he urged humane policies and bipartisan immigration reform for an "effective, orderly immigration system."

Interviewed on "Face the Nation," Vance argued that the USCCB should "look in the mirror … and recognize that when they receive over $100 million USD to help resettle illegal immigrants, are they worried about humanitarian concerns? Or are they actually worried about their bottom line?"

To be clear, this line of attack appears to be false. USCCB contracts with the U.S. State Department to resettle refugees and has received over $100 million in recent years to do so; but refugee resettlement is a legal immigration program. The Catholic Church, rather than making money on this program, provides funding from its own budget to supplement its humanitarian work with refugees. For example, according to the USCCB's audited financial statements, in 2023, the most recent year reported, the USCCB spent over $134.2 million on resettlement services. Federal grants provided over $129.6 million for these services, with the USCCB covering the rest.

As a scholar of religion and migration, I see in this debate long-standing tensions among Catholic – and other Christian – thinkers and practitioners about moral obligations to people with whom we have closer versus more distant relationships.

This tension is magnified in the case of migrants without legal status, since most of these migrants do have close relationships with U.S. communities and citizens, but are not legally authorized by the U.S. government.

As a scholar of religion and migration, I see in this debate long-standing tensions among Catholic – and other Christian – thinkers and practitioners about moral obligations to people with whom we have closer versus more distant relationships.

Two perspectives on moral responsibility

In international relations, different stances on how to treat people who are not citizens of one's own state are described as "cosmopolitan" and "communitarian," respectively.

Some Christian thinkers have adopted these terms as a helpful way to understand Christian ethical debates over how to prioritize caring for people who are more closely connected or less connected to us. Those who take a cosmopolitan stance argue that Christians should care equally about all people of the world and should not show preference to family members or those within their near orbit, even if, for practical reasons, they do assist those close to them more often.

Meanwhile, thinkers who take a communitarian stance argue that Christians certainly should care about the well-being of all, but have a moral obligation to prefer helping people they have a closer relationship with, such as family members, those who are close geographically and possibly fellow citizens.

Christian theologies of neighborly love

Many Christian thinkers have developed perspectives on how to prioritize care for different neighbors by interpreting the words and actions of Jesus, as well as the teachings and practices of the early Christian church. Over time, Christian thinkers have also considered institutional statements and traditional teachings of different church bodies.

Early theologians, including Clement of Rome, the first-century bishop of Rome, and John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople in the fourth and fifth centuries, demonstrated cosmopolitan tendencies.

These early church leaders consider biblical passages, including commandments in the Hebrew Bible, to welcome strangers. In the Gospels of the New Testament, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan upholds a person of different ethnicity and religion from Jesus and his followers as an ideal "neighbor." It also praises acts of kindness across ethnic and religious boundaries.

In another passage, Jesus heals the daughter of a woman who was both non-Jewish and of foreign ethnicity, accepting her chastisement for his initial reluctance to assist a non-Jew.

Later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul used expansive language for the Christian community, particularly in Galatians, the ninth book of the New Testament: "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."

The contemporary Roman Catholic Church has often taken a cosmopolitan perspective on social issues. Pope Francis, in his message for the 2024 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, highlights the biblical passage that "our citizenship is in heaven" and states that "the encounter with the migrant … 'is also an encounter with Christ.'"

Catholic service organizations draw on this thinking when they help migrants in concrete ways. In addition to refugee resettlement services, many Catholic organizations provide humanitarian assistance such as food and shelter to migrants, no matter where they are from.

Christian communitarian thought

From a communitarian perspective, some thinkers argue that Christians' concrete obligations to members of their communities can differ from their obligations to others, even though they view all people as of equal moral worth.

New Testament writings describe how members of early Christian groups provided food and care for those in their communities – even as they also gave charity to the poor in the wider society.

St. Thomas Aquinas, whose writings have also become part of the current debate after Vance referenced them online, argues that Christians should assist people in need, even to the point of depriving themselves of luxuries or social standing. He consistently urges Christians to love all people as commanded by God. Yet he also writes that, all other things being equal, Christians can properly meet the needs of people close to them before they give to those outside their own family or close circles, and that in political matters, there can be some justification for preferring fellow citizens.

Some contemporary Christian thinkers apply similar ideas to relationships between citizens and noncitizens in modern states. Ethicist Mark Amstutz argues that

Christian thinkers do agree that Christians are commanded by God to show love for all people – those who are like them, those who are not like them and who are even enemies.

American Christian churches should incorporate a stronger focus on citizens' needs and solidarity within state communities into their statements on immigration. German Catholic thinker Manfred Spieker has advocated that Christian social teachings permit preferences for people one is close to, as well as requirements of cultural integration by immigrants.

These proponents of Christian communitarian perspectives continue to stress that all neighbors should be treated well—even if some are prioritized over others. In this way, Vance's remarks are not the best example of Christian communitarian thought, since migrants without legal status still should not be demonized nor falsely accused of criminal behavior, both of which Vance himself has done in the past few months.

Immigrants in communities and the command to love

Christian thinkers do agree that Christians are commanded by God to show love for all people – those

who are like them, those who are not like them and who are even enemies.

But it's possible that love could take different shapes in different relationships. Immigration poses a unique test case because immigrants are not citizens, but they are "close" neighbors to U.S. citizens.

Immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, are integral parts of the communities where they live. They work in vital jobs; in 2020-22, 42% of hired farmworkers were migrants without legal status. Immigrants, both with legal status and without, have brought new workers and young families to small towns whose populations have declined in recent decades.

This further nuances or shades debates about cosmopolitan and communitarian moral perspectives, since immigrants arrive from places outside the U.S. but have close relationships with U.S. citizens, whether as family members or as neighbors with whom they work, shop and worship.

At the moment, public debate over immigration reflects trends in U.S. politics as much or more than it does Christian ethics. Yet Christian communities do continue to wrestle with cosmopolitan and communitarian ways of thinking, as they try to understand and apply Christian scriptural and moral commands to care for all people. ■

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Laura E. Alexander is associate professor of Religious Studies, University of Nebraska Omaha. *First published in The Conversation on February 11, 2025, it is reprinted here with permission of the author.*

Abraham Lincoln Said…It's the same old serpent..

Lincoln warned his listeners in response to Stephen A. Douglas that the idea of a small government that serves the needs of a few wealthy people is:

> *"…the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it. Turn in whatever way you will—whether it come from the mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouth of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent."*

—Abraham Lincoln, Speech in Chicago, July 10, 1858

Anabaptist Trumpism

By Melissa Florer-Bixler

Our forebears challenged authoritarian regimes. Now some of us vote for one.

Months before the November 2024 election, I began to prepare my church for the possibility of a second Trump term. I knew that ascendancy of Donald Trump to the highest office in the country would bring pain and difficulty to our church and our community. Already, in the first few weeks of office, those predictions have come to pass.

The trans people in my church worry about their future as the federal government attempts to enforce gender binaries based on dubious biological claims. We are a church that includes first generation Americans and people with unsettled immigration status. Our concern for their well-being grows as the new administration targets both undocumented immigrants and those who have arrived in this country through designated legal channels.

We watch the threat of authoritarianism grow with an unconstitutional executive order aimed at ending birthright citizenship. As a church with Latine, Black and Asian members, we are horrified to see Trump's appointees roll back civil rights protections and purge government agencies of those committed to antiracism and those charged with nonpartisan accountability.

During these terrible days, Raleigh Mennonite Church has been a place of refuge and safety. We return to one another, week after week, to find the place where we can find comfort and strength, provide materially for one another, plan our resistance to rising authoritarianism and work to protect those in our community who are in the crosshairs of the Trump administration.

The Mennonite tradition has given us theological and ecclesial resources that guide us in our collective work as an outpost of the body of Jesus. We have clung to the witness of our spiritual ancestors who refused to enact violence against their enemies, even as they took a bold stance of resistance against the state-church. We've held fast to the stories of Anabaptists whose radical call for peace challenged the authoritarian regimes of their countries, often leading to their own suffering.

But there is another strain within Anabaptism — the survivalist tradition. In late 2024, the *Washington Post* published an article revealing the most Republican names according to public election data: Andy Byler, Steven Stoltzfus, Elmer Stoltzfus, Jacob Stoltzfus and Benuel Stoltzfus. These are ethnic Anabaptist names, names that come from Pennsylvania and Midwest Amish communities. They constitute the most reliable Republican bloc in the United States.

This may come as a surprise to those outside the Mennonite church who associate our tradition with either nonparticipation in the state or the "transformative tradition" that provides a living witness to Jesus through intentional works of peace and justice. The Amish buck both expectations.

While the idea of an Amish Super Pac may be baffling based on our theology, a recent Anabaptist World article offered insight into the Trumpism among my co-religionists. It's likely that most people who call themselves Anabaptists in the United States voted for Trump in this election. In their article, Levi and Daniel Miller explain why.

These are ethnic Anabaptist names, names that come from Pennsylvania and Midwest Amish communities. They constitute the most reliable Republican bloc in the United States.

The authors describe the complexity within our religious community. Some people vote, and some do not. All are bound by "common theological threads such as the centrality of Christ, the Christian community and reconciliation in interpreting scripture."

Next, the Millers explain that the economy was the primary issue for them and other Mennonites in the 2024 presidential election. They cite their belief that government spending is raising inflation, making people poorer and unable to afford their basic needs.

There is no evidence for this — inflation is caused by supply chain issues, energy price volatility and corporate greed (charging more for products), not government spending. But the myth of Big Government taking away the ability of free markets to reward those

who are willing to work lives on in Amish country.

They next talk about "character," which may surprise Christians who are horrified by Donald Trump's status as a convicted felon, who was found liable for sexual abuse by a jury, who had an affair while his wife was pregnant, who makes fun of disabled people and jokes about grabbing women's genitals. But, for the authors, if Trump falters, he has at least brought in JD Vance to represent the kind of moral Christian character the Millers would like to see guiding our country — a man who managed to pull himself up by his bootstraps and become a wealthy success.

The Millers mention the good of free market economies twice in their assessment as to why many Mennonites voted for Trump. The authors seem to believe that the free market will work for those who work hard. They don't account for how the free market has led to the accumulation of vast wealth among a very few at the expense of most people, or how the insatiable appetites of these markets have led to the destruction of our planet and the climate disasters we are already experiencing. (Mennonite farmers are one of the primary sources of Brazilian deforestation.) They don't share my concerns about the racialized nature of our economy, and how systems that benefit white people continue to disadvantage those who don't look like most white ethnic Mennonites.

The final reason the Millers suggest Mennonites voted for Trump is their new appreciation for Christendom. Anabaptists faced terrible persecution in our emergence but, the writers explain, we now experience a Christendom that provides safe passage for Christians like the Millers. "Christendom," they write, "has provided us some stability on traditional marriage, family and sexual norms." In other words, instead of being a minority, struggling for survival, these Anabaptists now enjoy their status as the center of the social order, with the power of the government at their back.

I know that many people were angry that *Anabaptist World* published this article; but for me and my community, this article was a warning about what happens to us as a people when we pursue survival at any cost. Our Anabaptist history is one of radical commitment to the gospel, but it is also one in which white, ethnic Anabaptists responded to the trauma of persecution and displacement by aligning themselves with the sinful and deadly interests of the state.

Following their displacement and persecution in Europe, European Mennonites emigrated to the Americas. They were welcomed with open arms as hardworking farmers who stayed out of government business. While claiming non-resistance and refusing to bear arms, these communities were more than willing to claim the lands of indigenous peoples who were eradicated or displaced by the U.S. military.

At Raleigh Mennonite Church, we are part of the Repair Network to atone for this sin, undo the Doctrine of Discovery and to discover the ways we can thwart colonialism in the present.

The rise of the Third Reich in Europe was another time when ethnic Mennonites assured their survival by racializing their identity. Because European Mennonites lived in cloistered communities for centuries, the Nazis saw Mennonites as an ideal Aryan race to study and quantify. Nazis undertook extensive documentation of Mennonites' "pure German blood." Many Mennonites in Europe embraced their racial purity status.

By 1933, the United (Vereinigung) Mennonites stopped asking for conscientious objector status from the German government. In 1934, the Danzig Mennonites removed pacifism from their confession of faith. Mennonites under the Third Reich wanted to survive, and they embraced Christendom's favoritism, first accepting the protection of Nazis and eventually aiding their terror by serving in every branch of the military, running concentration camps, and swearing oaths to Hitler.

Our Anabaptist history is one of radical commitment to the gospel, but it is also one in which white, ethnic Anabaptists responded to the trauma of persecution and displacement by aligning themselves with the sinful and deadly interests of the state.

German Mennonites shifted their theology from voluntary membership in a visible church to a blood-bound nation. They reiterated conspiracy theories about the Jews, scapegoating their historic trauma onto this vulnerable and persecuted people.

Despite being outside the fold of ethnic Mennonites, I am vigilant in my commitment to learn from the disasters of White racialization of Mennonite identity. I am wary of uncomplicated Mennonite histories that glorify suffering without an account of the ways ethnic Mennonites secured their survival. (*Healing Haunted Histories* by Ched Myers and Elaine Enns is an excellent guide for those who hold both historical trauma and traumatization in their family line.)

The history of ethnic Mennonites is a history of

receiving the spoils of Whiteness even as these communities fenced themselves off from active participation in the violence required to realize their (White) economic and social gain — from colonization of the Americas to relying on the police to protect their private property. I pay special attention to these contradictions when they appear in the guise of righteous pacifism.

The Millers wrote for explanation, and perhaps in hopes of empathy. Instead, I receive their assessment of Anabaptist Trumpism as an alarm we must heed if we are to recover witness to the peaceable kingdom in our tradition. In response, I've redoubled my commitment to those who refuse the seduction of Christian nationalism. I have pledged myself again to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to put myself in the place where Jesus is, among those whom the Trump administration seeks to destroy. ■

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Jayber Crow by Wendell Berry:

***Jayber Crow**, in addition to being the town barber, was the church custodian. He called it his janitor ship. And though not religious, he went to church with the people at fictional Port William, KY. He said:*

I thought that some of the hymns bespoke the true religion of the place. The people didn't really want to be saints of self-deprivation and hatred of the world. They knew that the world would sooner or later deprive them of all it had given them, but still they liked it. What they came together for was to acknowledge, just by coming, their losses and failures and sorrows, their need for comfort, their faith always needing to be greater, their wish (in spite of all words and acts to the contrary), to love one another and to forgive and be forgiven, their need for one another's help and company and divine gifts, their hope (and experience) of love surpassing death, their gratitude. I loved to hear them sing "The Unclouded Day" and "Sweet By and By""

We shall sing on that beautiful shore
The melodious songs of the blest . . .

And in times of sorrow when they sang "Abide with Me," I could not raise my head.

Source: *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry, page 163 published September 1, 2001 by Counterpoint.

A TikTok Jesus Promises Divine Blessings and Many Worldly Comforts

By Brandon Dean

The TikTok profile, Daily Believer (@believerdaily), has 70 videos with computer-generated Jesus figures looking directly at the viewer, beseeching them to stop scrolling and watch the next minute's worth of content.

All these Jesuses are long-haired and bearded, recalling artist Warner Sallman's ubiquitous 1940 painting "Head of Christ." Some wear the crown of thorns; some look alarmingly like the actor Jared Leto. Nearly all promise a surprise or "good news soon" in exchange for the viewer liking, commenting "Amen" or sharing it with their friends and family. With this digital outreach, the Daily Believer has gained, as of Nov. 13, 2023, 813,200 followers and over 9.2 million likes.

As a scholar of religion in the U.S. and its intersection with popular culture, I have been studying the ways American Christians have used media and popular culture to perform religious work and evangelical outreach for the past 13 years. I argue that this TikTok phenomenon, in which viewers are promised good luck for sharing, liking and commenting on videos of a computer-generated Jesus, is close to what is known as the prosperity gospel – that is, a Christian belief that God will reward faith with this-worldly comforts, like health and wealth.

Computer-generated Jesus

"Welcome Jesus into Your Home" is among the Daily Believer's most popular videos, with over 22.2 million subscribers. According to the computer-generated Jesus, if the viewer believes in God, they must share this video with their friends and family and comment "I believe."

If they do, they will receive a blessing within an hour. If they do not, computer-generated Jesus issues a thinly veiled threat of damnation by quoting Matthew 3:10, which has John the Baptist saying, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

It is a TikTok chain letter – one whose creator can be monetarily compensated, by TikTok, between two cents and four cents for every 1,000 views. For example, "Welcome Jesus into Your Home" could have earned the creator $900 from TikTok views alone, with the possibility for additional money earned on sites like Facebook Reels.

It is simple and effective. While the Daily Believer's views are dwarfed by TikTok megastars like socialite Kylie Jenner and social media personality Khaby Lame, its engagement percentages are much higher, receiving some form of engagement from about one out of every four viewers.

Whether or not there are religious motivations underlying the Daily Believer's desire for viewer engagement, there are monetary benefits for sure. The TikTok Creator Fund pays creators who have over 10,000 authentic followers based on the number of views, comments and sharing.

What I found were two very different versions of religion: a civil religion that would make Robert Bellah proud and one that defines the nation as a whole, and a Manichean view of religion where "they" are always out to get the true and faithful Christians.

Faith equals wealth and health

Religious and monetary motivations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, their union is key to one of the more popular recent developments in American and global Christianity – the prosperity gospel, a subsection of charismatic Christianity that says God will ensure followers' material wealth and happiness as long as they believe in God.

The closest nonreligious analogy to the Daily Believer's content is the chain letter where the recipient is promised good luck for forwarding and curses for breaking the chain. Such letters had their heyday in the mid-20th century as paper letters and in the late 1990s and early 2000s as emails and social media posts.

Two of the United States' most famous preachers, T.D. Jakes and Joel Osteen, teach that individual faith in God will be rewarded by God in the form of material wealth and health.

However, the Daily Believer further simplifies this formula. Viewers don't really need to have a specific set of Christian beliefs to participate and benefit. All that they need to do is to say "I believe" and share the content with friends and family.

Turning likes and shares into cash

This lack of denominational-specific beliefs allows for the widest possible engagement with a wider Christian community.

The TikTok videos can appeal to a spectrum of Christian groups that may have theological, ethical and social disagreements.

Additionally, the Daily Believer's requests for social media engagement are analogous to the prosperity gospel's idea of tithing. In the prosperity gospel, tithing – the donation of a portion of your income to the church – is framed as "seed faith," a monetary investment to demonstrate a person's faith; and lack of faith will be punished as surely as faith is to be rewarded.

Seed faith and engagement with the Daily Believer's TikTok videos have the same ritualistic function – give a little time, money or effort to get even more material rewards. They also both serve to make the person behind the request wealthier or increase their cultural clout.

By framing these requests as coming directly from the Son of God, not the influencer or content creator, the Daily Believer has made engagement with its social media religious work, which comes with a promise of divine reward in the here and now. It has transformed like-farming – the social media phenomenon of asking for viewer engagement – into the word of God.

Use of Jesus' image

At the same time, it is difficult to see the Daily Believer's content as having a missionary or outreach function. It seems aimed at those who would already consider themselves Christian and offers little in the way of persuasion or explanation of why someone should be a Christian.

The Daily Believer is not the only TikTok profile engaged in a type of "smash that like button if you love Jesus" content production. Within the larger phenomena of #ChristianTikTok, there are multiple profiles engaged in theological discussion and doctrinal issues. There are even more profiles that forgo discussion in favor of performing praise and worship.

The use of Jesus' image as the deliverer of the message is more unique.

But the Daily Believer, with its digital Jesus and its bare-bones gospel of "Believe," serves as an example of a new expression of an ancient religious motivation – the securing of this-worldly health, wealth and reward in exchange for following the will of the deity or deities. ■

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Brandon Dean is a visiting assistant professor of Religious Studies, University of Iowa. This article was originally published November 15, 2023 in The Conversation and is published here with permission of the author.

Book Review

The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story

by Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays
(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024)
272 pages)
Reviewed by Fisher Humphreys

Christopher Hays is a Presbyterian Old Testament professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, a highly respected evangelical graduate school in California, and a research associate of the University of Pretoria in South Africa. His father, Richard Hays, was a Methodist New Testament scholar who taught at Yale Divinity School and at Duke Divinity School and was for a time dean of the school at Duke. He died in January 2025 of pancreatic cancer.

Richard was the author of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996) which included a chapter on homosexuality. In it, he wrote that churches should welcome gay and lesbian Christians, but he also said that the handful of passages in the Bible that refer to homoerotic activity "express unqualified disapproval." In the new book, he says "that statement still seems to me to be correct" (page 8), but he qualifies it: "It is relatively clear that these texts view homosexual sex negatively, even if they do not envisage covenanted same-sex partnerships as we know them today" (206). The texts to which he is referring are Gen. 19:1-3, Lev. 18:22, 20:13, 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 1 Tim 1:10, and Rom. 1:18-32.

Richard also wrote in 1996 that God calls gay and lesbian Christians to live unmarried, celibate lives. Since then he has changed his mind about that, principally for two reasons. First, in his classes and in his church he has observed God's Spirit at work in the lives of LGBTQ persons. This is exactly what happened when Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius. The Spirit came to the gentiles, so Peter felt compelled to accept and baptize them (Acts 10:34-48).

Second, instead of focusing on the handful of passages about homoerotic love, in this new book Richard and Christopher have given their attention to what might be called a metanarrative of the Bible. The metanarrative is that God's mercy has been widening to include more and more groups of people. I'll say more about this below.

In 1996, Richard hoped that his call to churches to welcome homosexual persons would result in greater compassion and acceptance for them. Instead, traditionalists used the chapter to condemn and reject homosexual persons. This pained Richard deeply, and he felt responsible for it. "The present book is, for me, an effort to offer contrition and to set the record straight on where I now stand" (225). "In this book I want to start over—to repent of the narrowness of my earlier vision and to explore *a new way of listening to the story that scripture tells about the widening scope of God's mercy*" (10, his italics).

Chris' story is not as dramatic as Richard's, but he confesses that when he saw gay and lesbian people being hurt in his early years at Fuller Seminary, "I was too often silent" (13). Now, he says, "I'm done being safe while many others are not" (11). He suggested to his father that they write this book together in order "to right some past wrongs" (16).

"In this book I want to start over—to repent of the narrowness of my earlier vision and to explore a new way of listening to the story that scripture tells about the widening scope of God's mercy."

Although the authors do not mention it in the book, the title is a play on words found in a beloved 1854 hymn by Frederick Faber. It has multiple verses, including these:

> There's a wideness in God's mercy,
> Like the wideness of the sea;
> There's a kindness in His justice,
> Which is more than liberty.
>
> But we make His love too narrow
> By false limits of our own;
> And we magnify His strictness
> With a zeal He will not own.
>
> For the love of God is broader
> Than the measure of one's mind;

And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

In ordinary speech the word *mercy* is usually used to mean not punishing or not hurting. The Hayses use it in a broader, richer sense: "To speak of God's mercy is to point to God's overflowing love, God's propensity to embrace, heal, restore, and reconcile all of creation" (18). So the title *The Widening of God's Mercy* refers to the extending of God's love, embrace, healing, restoration and reconciliation to more and more people and, importantly, to more and more groups of people.

When I think about what the Bible says about God embracing more groups of people, two stories come immediately to mind. One is the story of Jonah. God commissioned Jonah to call the gentile people of Ninevah to repent of their sins, but Jonah tried his best not to do it. When he finally did go to Ninevah and the people repented, "God changed his mind about the calamities that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). This made Jonah so mad he wanted to die. Clearly God's mercy reached a lot further than Jonah thought it should.

The other story that comes to mind is told in Acts and is reflected in the epistles of the New Testament. It is the story of how the early church came to incorporate gentiles into its life on an equal footing with Jews. Philip's witness to Samaritans and later to an Ethiopian (Acts 8), Peter's visit with the Roman Cornelius (Acts 10), Paul's wide-ranging mission to gentiles, and the Jerusalem council's decision to welcome gentiles (Acts 15) all bear witness to the church's success in welcoming gentiles. They did it so well that Paul could later write, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28).

The authors provide convincing accounts of the widening of God's mercy for Jonah in chapter 6 and for the early church in chapters 12-16. They also demonstrate in chapters 8-11 that Jesus talked about and acted out a wideness of God's mercy that included lepers, tax collectors, women, Samaritans, and, even though he did not conduct a mission to them, gentiles. The authors provide multiple other biblical examples of the widening of God's mercy.

Even though they do not address the passages that speak directly of homoerotic activity, the authors do address them indirectly by pointing out that across the centuries "*biblical laws and customs change*" (55, their italics). They provide multiple examples of this. By far the most dramatic is found in Ezekiel 20 to which Chris devotes an entire chapter (chapter 4). Writing from exile in Babylon, Ezekiel delivers a long speech recounting the people's history. At some point in their history God says that, because of their disobedience, "I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord" (Eze. 20:25-6). God commanded the people to sacrifice their children! Needless to say, this command was later reversed and child sacrifice was repudiated—the prophets repeatedly condemned child sacrifice. Jeremiah claimed that God never commanded them to sacrifice children: "I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination" (Jer. 32:35).

The point of all this is that, since some of God's commands are later rescinded, that may be true of commands prohibiting homoerotic activity.

This brings us to the difficult issue of God's mutability. We might put it this way: It is one thing to say that God changes. In the biblical stories God is seen as engaging in relationships with human beings and as responsive to them and as doing new things, and in those senses God changes. But it is another altogether

The authors provide convincing accounts of the widening of God's mercy for Jonah in chapter 6 and for the early church in chapters 12-16. They also demonstrate in chapters 8-11 that Jesus talked about and acted out a wideness of God's mercy that included lepers, tax collectors, women, Samaritans, and, even though he did not conduct a mission to them, gentiles.

to say that God changes from not loving to loving certain groups of people, something the Bible does not say.

Or we could phrase it this way: It is one thing to say that over time the people of God learned that God's mercy reached more widely than they had realized before. That is something that people of all theological persuasions can accept. It is another thing entirely to say that over time God's mercy—God's love, embrace, healing, restoration and reconciliation—has been extended to groups of people towards whom in the past God did not show mercy.

Do the Hayses really believe that across time God

came to love and accept people that God had previously had not loved? They don't seem to have said it directly, though there are passages, including the book's title itself, when they seem to be saying it indirectly. But I am not so sure.

In November 2024, the *New York Times* published an interview with Richard Hays. The interviewer, Peter Wehner, asked Hays: "Is it your view that in A.D. 30 and before, God did believe homosexuality was sinful and that he's since changed his mind?"

Hays replied:

> "Well, I certainly wouldn't presume to say that I know better than God, that God was wrong. I think I would say that God had reasons for telling the children of Israel in the wilderness to observe a limitation of sexual relations to heterosexual relationships … I don't understand the purposes of God fully."

In his extensive unpacking of Ezekiel 20, Chris Hays says something similar to what his father said in the interview:

> "As with the law of the sacrifice of the firstborn, the laws about sexuality in the Torah have done harm to children. I and many other biblical scholars are in a camp analogous to Jeremiah's, believing that the laws have been misunderstood and misapplied. Others may prefer to take a stance like Ezekiel's and simply say that the laws given were not good. But hopefully like the two prophets, we can agree that they should not hold today. We consider these laws, with their conflicted interpretations, to be superseded by the overwhelming divine command to love, and by the expansion of God's grace" (68-9).

So I suspect that when the authors write about "the widening of God's mercy" they are usually thinking "the widening of [the people's awareness of] God's mercy" or of God taking new steps to extend God's mercy to new groups of people through the work of the covenant people. It makes me uncomfortable to offer this interpretation of the book because other reviewers have come to the opposite conclusion. But this seems right to me. In any case, I think readers should be alert to the ambiguity.

The authors said: "Our goal is to demonstrate that the biblical story, taken as a whole, depicts the ever-widening path of God's mercy" (22). Bearing in mind the qualification I just offered, I think they have succeeded in this.

They had a secondary goal also: "The many biblical stories of God's widening mercy invite us to re-envision how God means us to think and act today with regard to human sexuality" (206). They want their book to encourage the church today to welcome and affirm LGBTQ persons: "To say it one more time, our vision is this: *The biblical narratives throughout the Old Testament and the New trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities no longer as 'strangers and aliens' but as 'fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.'* Full stop" (207, their italics).

I believe the Hayses achieved this goal also. I think they have earned the right to claim: "We advocate full inclusion of believers with differing sexual orientations *not* because we reject the authority of the Bible. Far from it: We have come to advocate their inclusion precisely because we affirm the force and authority of the Bible's ongoing story of God's mercy" (214).

This is a remarkable achievement, and one I welcome.

I have two concluding comments. First, their achievement is not dependent on the idea that over time God came to love groups of people, LGBTQ or any other, whom God had previously not loved. The hints of that idea found in the book and its title have gotten a lot of attention for the book, but the idea is not necessary for the achievement of their two goals. All that is necessary is the recognition that over time God's covenant people have come to understand more and more fully that God loves all people. God has taken new steps to reach out in mercy to new groups of people through the work of the covenant people. God has rescinded some of the commands and prohibitions that God had previously given to the covenant people.

"To say it one more time, our vision is this: The biblical narratives throughout the Old Testament and the New trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities no longer as 'strangers and aliens' but as 'fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.' Full stop" (207, their italics).

My second concluding comment concerns the extent of their achievement. The authors have not proved that the church should accept and affirm LGBTQ persons. They do not claim to have proved this. What they have done is to show that when the church accepts and affirms LGBTQ persons as full members, it is following faithfully a pattern that appears repeatedly in the

Bible. "Because God sometimes changes his mind and his approaches to the world, faithfulness to God means sometimes doing the same" (205).

This book is a beautiful example of theology in the service of the church. It is also a major contribution to the church's ongoing conversation about homosexuality. I commend it to readers of this journal enthusiastically. ■

Fisher Humphreys is Professor Emeritus of Theology at Beeson School of Divinity, A long-standing member of the CET board and frequent writer.

A Special Note from the Editor

The Enormous Value of Preachers and Their Sermons…

Patrick Anderson

Regular readers of *Christian Ethics Today* know that I sometimes include sermon manuscripts in the journal. Good preaching is good literature. For instance, in the previous issue I included a sermon by Wendell Griffen about the social resistance of Shiphrah and Puah, without whom there would not have been a Moses.

Clyde Fant, while he was a preaching professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, told his students:

> *If you have ever had the privilege of standing in a pulpit to read from the Bible, and then, under the power of the Holy Spirit, exegete that passage and apply its relevance to the real lives of listeners…you have participated in one of life's greatest experiences.*

A good sermon, in my view, is a work of art. Sometimes it is prophetic, sometimes disturbing, sometimes entertaining. When a preacher interprets the Bible in fresh ways, with careful construct of words, applied in ways that instruct, inspire, convict, energize and challenge us, sometimes (but certainly not always), we find ourselves hearing directly from Almighty God. Such experiences are unforgettable, holy.

I love good preaching and have been blessed throughout my life to have been in the presence of some good preaching. In this issue, I have included two manuscripts of recent sermons. The first, preached by the Reverend Senator Raphael Warnock, senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and United States Senator from Georgia, was delivered at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. recently. He read from Acts 10, the interactions between God, Cornelius and Simon Peter that demonstrated *the DEI nature of God*.

The second was preached by the Rev. Alan Sherouse, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, NC. With the sermon title of *Findng Our Place*, he used the scripture from Acts 4: 14-21 to describe the church's transformation into a welcoming, affirming, inclusive community of faith.

I offer these sermons along with the many sermons I have included through the years in previous issues of *Christian Ethics Today* in the spirit of the mythical rooster, who upon finding an ostrich egg in the chicken yard one morning, called the hens together and said;

> *"Ladies, it is not that I expect this from each one of you,*
> *but I just want to show you* ***what is being done****."* ■

When a preacher interprets the Bible in fresh ways, with careful construct of words, applied in ways that instruct, inspire, convict, energize and challenge us, sometimes (but certainly not always), we find ourselves hearing directly from Almighty God. Such experiences are unforgettable, holy.

God's Executive Order

By Raphael Warnock

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength, our rock and our redeemer.

Thank you very much, Reverend Hamlin. And to our presider, Canon Duncan. To the Dean of the Chapel, the Dean of the Cathedral, I should say, Dean Hollerith. To all of the clergy and those who lead us in worship through song. Sisters and Brothers, how good and how pleasant it is for us to dwell together in unity. The church is packed this morning. I think it is a good time for all of us to be in church. Aren't you glad to be in God's house? Aren't you glad to be in God's house? I know the Episcopalian tradition, they're a little bit more staid, but there's a Baptist preacher in the pulpit. You can clap while I'm here. Come on. Give God some praise in that house. Praise your Lord. They call y'all the Frozen Chosen, but I'm always glad to be here in the Cathedral.

I want to read, if I might take the privilege, yet another passage of scripture. It's also a good time to read the Bible. And I want to center my remarks in the Book of Acts, the 10th chapter. And I want to encourage you to read the entire chapter. I won't read all of it this morning, but I will read several verses. And I want to encourage you in your time of prayer, (It's a good time to pray.), in your time of devotion, to read the entire passage. But let me just put the story for the most part in front of you.

> *In Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian court as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!.. And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him. And after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.*
>
> *About noon the next day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat. And while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. Here's what he saw. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it, were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat.. But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*
>
> *Going to verse 34:. Then Peter began to speak to them. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." I truly understand that God shows no partiality.*

For those who have made diversity and equity and inclusion toxic political terms. I want to ask, if you don't want diversity, what's the opposite of diversity? What's the opposite of equity? If you don't want inclusion, what do you want the world to look like?

I want to talk for just a little while about God's Executive Order. God's Executive Order. You may have heard that since January 20th, we have witnessed the signing and swift enactment of a flurry of executive orders that would foist upon us a very narrow vision and view, it seems to me, of what it means to be an American, or what it means to be human. It would move us back towards some romanticized view of the past and reshape the character of the country and the character of government in some fundamental ways.

More than 50 executive orders, some of which the courts are demonstrating that are unconstitutional and some of which are illegal. Everything from birthright citizenship to the dismissal of much of the federal workforce and in places like CDC in Atlanta, Centers for Control of Disease Prevention and the NIH, I'm praying for our federal workers, for those affected by the bans on transgender people serving in the military, the imposition of tariffs, to the abrupt stoppages on practically all foreign aid. We compromised our global health programs in places where outbreaks of Ebola, avian flu and pox are happening right now, putting all of us at risk. Dr. King was right, not just theologically and ethically, but he was right biologically. We are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. If Ebola is over there in a global village, I might be in peril; it can happen over here. And yet among these executive orders has been a wholesale unabashed assault on anything and everything that looks like diversity, equity and inclusion.

For those who have made diversity and equity and inclusion toxic political terms. I want to ask, if you don't want diversity, what's the opposite of diversity? What's the opposite of equity? If you don't want inclusion, what do you want the world to look like? There has been an all-out assaults on these concepts, black people, other people of color, women, members of the L-G-B-T-Q-I-A community, veterans, the disabled, the undocumented, and all those who are members of families where some are undocumented. There is a DEI watch list as if fighting for a diverse and equitable and inclusive world is a crime.

And that's why this morning I want to take a point of personal privilege and thank Bishop Mariann Budde. I want to thank her for her powerful and prophetic voice as she speaks truth to power and addressed the fear and the anxiety that so many are feeling right now. I can't go anywhere, or get through the airport without folks pulling on me saying, "What in the world are we going to do?"

In the midst of the dark clouds, Bishop Budde had the courage to stand in the best of our tradition and speak the truth. And I submit to you that she need not apologize to anybody. When the prophet speaks, the prophet doesn't apologize. Those who hear are called to repent. And so, let's stand together in the best of the biblical tradition. Folks who have no vision traffic in division. They don't know how to lead us. And so, they seek to divide us and God help us to catch up to God's vision, God's dream for the world. (I heard an 'amen.' There's a Baptist out there somewhere.) The gospel teaches us that in God's economy, in God's dream for the world, in God's vision, there is diversity.

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus said, ",,,but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem." But he didn't stop there, adding also in Judea. But you can't stop there. You've got to go to Samaria. But you can't stop there. You've got to take this gospel of love and justice to the ends of the earth." The Jesus Movement is a diverse movement. It was a diverse movement from the start. And in this our text, God is pushing this little movement to become more by embracing all. We become more when we embrace all. In our diversity is our strength. And in this text, God is speaking to Cornelius. Go back and read Acts chapter 10. God speaks to Cornelius and at the same time, the God who is speaking to Cornelius over here is speaking to Peter over there. He is speaking to Peter over there and he's speaking to Cornelius over here at the same time. And they could not be more different. Cornelius is a Gentile. Peter is a Jew. Not only is Cornelius a Gentile, but he is a Roman soldier, a high-ranking officer in the Roman army.

Yet Peter cannot be all that he ought to be until Cornelius can be all that he ought to be. And Cornelius cannot be all that he ought to be until Peter becomes all that he ought to be. And that's why God told Cornelius to send a posse of brothers to Peter's house.

Peter is a member of a colonized and conquered people. God speaks to the colonizer and the colonized at the same time. Only God can get us together like that. They could not be more different. Yet Peter cannot be all that he ought to be until Cornelius can be all that he ought to be. And Cornelius cannot be all that he ought to be until Peter becomes all that he ought to be. And that's why God told Cornelius to send a posse of brothers to Peter's house.

That's how we said it in my neighborhood. Long before I went to the Senate, I grew up in the Kayton Homes Housing Projects on the west side of Savannah, Georgia. God said, "Send your boys now to Joppa. You are a Gentile and Peter is a Jew, but y'all need each other." And about noon the next day, as the men were on their way to Joppa, the God who spoke to Cornelius spoke to Peter on the rooftop where he went to pray.

He was hungry; he needed nourishment; he needed something to eat. And while the food was being prepared, he fell into a trance and the heavens opened and he saw something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. And in it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. In other words, it was filled with animals that Peter as a devout Jew was forbidden to eat, forbidden by the old laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Yet God says, "Kill and eat everything that was coming down." Most of it offended Peter's sensibilities. And that's why God has to tell him three times that it was all right to partake, to participate, to kill and eat. The command flew in the face of what Peter was raised to believe.

And so I dropped by the National Cathedral in this moral moment in America to say to you that diversity is sometimes offensive. It makes you uncomfortable. Why? Because when you are accustomed to privilege, diversity might feel like oppression, pushing you outta' your comfort zone. And there are moments when all of us are made to feel uncomfortable, when we are pushed to be in places that strain against our sensibilities.

And yet I feel God in this moment stretching us because there's no growth without discomfort. If you are uncomfortable, good! God is doing something! Think about your own life. You didn't experience those moments of growth when you were comfortable. You experienced the greatest moments in your personal growth when you were made to be uncomfortable. And that's what God does. God shows up to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. Peter is offended based on the old ways. And so, churches, we deal with the discomfort we all feel from time to time around issues of race and ethnicity, around sexism and misogyny, around our assumptions about the nature of human sexuality, and as members of the LGBTQ community push all of us.

We wrestle with notions of who's clean and who's unclean. I want you to think about this. Peter is offended by the things he sees coming down in that sheet, all of those animals. Meanwhile, he is literally lodging in the house of Simon the Tanner. Listen. Simon Peter, who had all kinds of prohibitions about the handling of the carcasses of dead animals was already lodging with a new gentile convert whose profession was tanning—making leather products from the carcasses of dead animals!

In other words, he was already living in a house supported by the gifts of those whose practices he despised. It sounds like church to me. To be in this house is often to live and to be blessed by the gifts of those whose practices we despise. It certainly sounds like the Black church when you witness the glory and the beauty of the Black church and its worship, especially its music, which is living in a house supported by the gifts of those who we refuse to see. It is true in the church house. It is also true in the White House. Don't tell me you reject DEI when you live in a White House built by black hands. Let me shout it this morning from the White House. The White House is a DEI house built by slaves who worked without the benefit of compensation. Simon Peter is living in the house of the tanner and God is pushing him to a new place. God's vision for the world is where there is diversity. Come in and see that in God's vision for the world, there is equity.

When Peter arrives at the house of Cornelius, Cornelius falls down at his feet and worships him. And Peter says, "Stand up. I am only immortal. I'm only a human being. I am a man." No matter who we are, no matter the color of our skin, no matter our zip code, I'm only a man. I'm only a woman. I'm only a human being. And that's what oppressed people have to do all the time.

"God shows no partiality." The God of the heavens and the God of the earth is a God of diversity and equity. And there are no big 'I's in little 'you's'. All of us are children of the living God.

Do you remember the signs of those workers whom Dr. King came by to see in Memphis, Tennessee, as they were fighting for their basic human humanity and dignity? Remember those signs and what they said? They simply said, "I am a man." That's how you know you're an oppressed person. Oppressed people have to make signs, have to have campaigns and movements to assert that which ought to be obvious. We have to have a campaign to assert our own human dignity. I'm a man. Sojourner Truth, ain't I a woman? A few years ago, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" was coined and some folk got mad. How dare you say, black lives matter.

And so why do we need a Black History Month? Why do we have these HBCUs, these historically black colleges and universities? Because they didn't let us in other spaces. Somehow, we translated our pain into power, our marginalization into music. And here we're on this grand Sunday morning, red, yellow, brown, black and white, speaking with one voice in this moral moment saying, "God shows no partial-

ity." The God of the heavens and the God of the earth is a God of diversity and equity. And there are no big 'I's in little 'you's'. All of us are children of the living God.

And then finally, the text teaches us something else. In God's vision for the world, there is diversity, there is equity. In God's vision for the world, there is inclusion. In God's vision, there is inclusion. Cornelius said to Peter, "I sent for you and you have been kind enough to come.". And so now, all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded us to say.

The text says that as Peter preached, the Holy Spirit showed up and saved Cornelius and everybody in the house, Jews and Gentiles. God believes in DEI. You can call it whatever you want to call it. I just want some justice in the world. I'm not wed to the term, I'm wed to results. But while we figure out what to call it, let me just say to you that DEI or 'dei' is the Latin word for God. We were created in the Imago Dei, in the image of God. And the only way for us to see the image of God on earth as it is in heaven, is for all of us to get together. You only see the image of God when there is diversity, when all of us are here together. And so, I don't care what your race is, red, yellow, brown, black or white. If you work for God, you are a DEI hire. I work for God.

And so in closing, a few weeks ago, in the wake of the tragic mid-air collision, not far from here, involving a Black Hawk helicopter, and a commercial jet, a man with a big microphone stood up, without any evidence, and blamed the whole thing on DEI. Think about that. While dozens of bodies were still beneath the chilly waters of the Potomac, he was busy playing a sad and awful game. And how sad and ironic because families were still being notified; people were dealing with their grief. And ironically, aviation is one of the least diverse sectors of our economy. Over 92 percent of the commercial pilots in the United States are white. Less than four percent are black, 4.6 percent are women. It is one of the least diverse sectors in our economy. Meanwhile, listen, we have a shortage of pilots. Pilots are aging out. We don't have enough. And a little while ago on an official Senate visit, I was down in Georgia and I met a young black man named Ezekiel. And his vision was to be a pilot. He wanted to fly and he has the intellectual aptitude. But 10 years later, he was having a hard time making it into the industry. Why? Because it's expensive to get the necessary flight hours. And he was so committed that he spent all of his money, had spent $100,000 of his own money working here, and then going back to school, and then going back to work, and then going back to school. Why? Because he wanted to fly. And as I looked into his eyes, he had that thing in his eye that you love to see in the eyes of every young person who has found that thing he wants to do.

Howard Thurman said, "Ask not what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." And this young man had come alive wanting that thing. But he was from the wrong zip code. We've created barriers that have made it too hard for young boys like Ezekiel and for girls, to fly. Meanwhile, we need pilots. And so, I got busy writing a bill to make sure we are tapping into the genius and talent of all of our children because a child's outcome ought not be based on their parents' income. I know a God who creates talent and genius and brilliance all over the town, on all sides of the track, in every area code, in every zip code. And so all I want to say to you, National Cathedral, is that it takes all of us to fly. And if we don't rely on all of us, we'll find that we're stuck on the ground. I don't know about you, but I want to fly high. I want all that God has imagined for America, all that God has imagined for all of God's children.

You only see the image of God when there is diversity, when all of us are here together. And so, I don't care what your race is, red, yellow, brown, black or white. If you work for God, you are a DEI hire. I work for God.

In the black church, we sing, "I'm pressing on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining every day; still praying as I'm onward bound, Lord, plant my feet on higher ground." When we pray together, when we stay together, when we work together, when we love each other and pray for each other, rather than preying on each other, we can take off. We can capture God's vision and God's dream for the world. ■

Sermon preached by The Reverend Senator Dr. Raphael Warnock on Sunday Holy Eucharist, February 16, 2025 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Senator Warnock is the senior pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA and the junior senator from Georgia.

Finding Our Place

by Alan Sherouse

Text: Luke 4:14-21

"*A*nd Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place from which he would read."

This is a moment of declaration. Of clarity. Of pronouncement. For Jesus.

He's back home, amongst familiar people, with their set expectations of who he is and what he is about. They've known him since he was "yay big," understand. They love to hear him read in the synagogue, and they're murmuring with expectation as he strides to the front, unrolls the scroll, and reads, "Good news to the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed."

It's a large scroll, understand. One of many available in the hometown synagogue. But Jesus asks for Isaiah. Once handed to him, he unrolls it. Every action is described here. It's a meticulous account, all of these verbs creating suspense and drawing attention, Luke causing us all to lean in along with the hometown crowd until "he found the place from which he would read."

It was my good friend, Rev. Darryl Aaron, who first pointed out to me this wonderful detail. Rev. Aaron, a friend and partner in ministry, a gifted preacher and interpreter of scripture, is pastor of Providence Baptist Church here in Greensboro. He often sees things I don't, and some years ago, discussing this passage, he said, "Don't miss that, Reverend… Jesus found his place."

Because when it comes to scripture, there are many places we can find ourselves. Part of why Rev. Aaron sees this before I do, is because of the way that the Black Church in the United States has always seen this and had to know this — that Scripture, our sacred text, is full of various messages, at times conflicting, and that the same collection that holds words of justice and joy, life and abundance, can be used for violence, condemnation, exclusion and subjugation.

The African American mystic and theologian Howard Thurman, himself a teacher of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once described how he used to read the Bible to his grandmother, and one day he opened it to the letters of Paul, and his grandmother said sharply, "Do not read that part." When he was curious, she described how she was born enslaved, how she sat through church services led by her enslavers and their preachers, and how they would frequently read from the letters of Paul. "And I told myself that if freedom ever came, and if I could ever read the Bible for myself, I would not read that part."

There are many places we can find. "Slaves, be subject to your masters." It's in the scroll. But, then, we can keep turning, keep unrolling, and we can also find our place where it reads, "In Christ, there is no longer slave nor free."

That's why it has been one of the gifts of the Black Church, to help us not only read the Bible, but to read it in a certain way, recognizing the great arc of God's love and mercy and justice. Recognizing that no one — no matter their claims of how precious and valued scripture is — no one weights all parts equally. To read the Bible is to interpret it and to make choices. To read the Bible is to find your place, you see. We all do. We have to decide how to be faithful in doing so, and as Christians we are most faithful when we read and interpret by measuring all parts against the love of God that we meet in Jesus.

There are many places we can find. "Slaves, be subject to your masters." It's in the scroll. But, then, we can keep turning, keep unrolling, and we can also find our place where it reads,"In Christ, there is no longer slave nor free."

This was part the work of Dr. King, whom we remembered this week. He was a preacher first, don't forget. His most famous writing, the Letter from Birmingham Jail was written, remember, to religious leaders — white faith leaders, seven Christian ministers and one rabbi, who had composed what they called a "Call to Unity," which included the urging that Dr. King stay away from Birmingham, refrain from bringing his disruptive message and demonstrations to

their town, and let them handle it and bring about the incremental sustainable change they imagined.

And if you want to, you can find your place in this kind of unity. You can read and interpret a message that leads to calm and tranquility, serenity and status quo. But Dr. King said, in so many words, that they were in the wrong place. That they were misplaced and misguided in preferring order to freedom, in asking him to wait when people had waited so long, in advocating for a peace that was ultimately what he deemed a "negative peace" defined by the absence of conflict rather than the presence of justice.

Instead, he put himself on the line for justice. He found his place much where Jesus found his.

As Jesus found his place with his mother before him. What was it she used to sing? "God has turned things upside down," Mary sang in the Magnificat. "God has scattered the proud. God has brought down rulers but lifted up the humble. God has sent the rich away but filled the hungry with good things."

He found his place like the prophets even earlier. "Let justice roll down," Amos had thundered. "What does the Lord require of you?" Micah asked already anticipating the answer, "To do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God." Or in the words of Isaiah, "Bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, declaring the year of the Lord's favor."

It's a message that disrupts and disturbs. Not simple unity. Not benign peace. Not the absence of conflict. But complete agitation.

So, from this story comes the lesson that "prophets are not welcome in their hometown." Or, as a professor once told our preaching class, "Prophets don't have pensions."

Some of you might know the name Vernon Tyson. Rev. Tyson was an iconic Methodist minister in our state, who served in Oxford in the height of racial injustice in the 60s and 70s and particularly after the 1970 killing of Henry Marrow and the riots that followed. Rev. Tyson worked across racial lines in an effort to bring justice, peace and reconciliation.

His son, Timothy Tyson, is a historian and professor at Duke, and has written a memoir about growing up in Oxford in the preacher's home, which has been turned into a film. The book and film are entitled, Blood Done Sign My Name.

At the outset of the film, young Vernon drives a station wagon and U-Haul with his wife and four children into Oxford. After they settle in the parsonage, he's seen walking into the church, sitting in a pew in the early evening light. Then standing in the back by the old black and white photographs of all the pastors that had preceded him there, where you can almost see him measuring himself and losing an inch of height with every moment.

From there, he makes a pastoral visit to an older member of the congregation, Mrs. Alwind.

"I heard you on the radio," she says. "You have a beautiful voice. I don't usually trust preachers with beautiful voices, they tend to think too highly of themselves."

She asks about his wife, their children, and then she says, "I've been a member of our church for 87 years. I've seen 20…22 pastors stand in that pulpit. Some good. Some not so good. But they all fell into one of two groups. They were either priests or they were prophets. The priests told us the comforting things we wanted to hear. The prophets challenged us with the difficult things we needed to hear. Which one are you, Reverend?"

"Well," he says, "I'd like to think I try to be a little bit of both."

"Oh, Reverend, in these times I think you're going to find it very hard to be both."

The time is urgent. For Jesus. "Today," he says.

It's a message that disrupts and disturbs. Not simple unity. Not benign peace. Not the absence of conflict. But complete agitation.

Not yesterday, as though the work is complete in everything they've known and done and rehearsed and revered in their tradition. Not in a vague, far-off someday, as though the change is one day in things out beyond their capacity to imagine and do. But today is a time for this truth to be told.

Scholars say this in some ways is Jesus' entire message in miniature form. It's the moment when he does what he can do only once, which is to declare his priorities at the outset. It's a defining moment. Might we even say it's an inaugural moment.

We are in a season of new leadership in the United States, including inauguration and the earliest moments of a new presidency. Inaugurations are full of symbolic action, declaration of priorities and indications of direction. There is always a rash of executive orders, in this case many that overwhelm and can even paralyze those of us tuned in to the news. Amidst this, it's so important to distinguish between what is being said and what is actually being done. But even so, there is much that overwhelms, and much that affects us specifically as a religious community,

and as a church seeking to follow in the way of Jesus, especially as it relates to those who are vulnerable and marginalized.

Notice in our passage, Jesus rolls up the scroll, and beyond the general themes he has proclaimed, he becomes specific, speaking of God's love for widows and those stricken with leprosy. He implies that the people of Nazareth had not treated them justly and that God's call is always to enact mercy to those deemed outcasts.

This week's actions and words do seem to isolate at least two groups of people who are among those marginalized still in our country. They were the focus of much throughout the presidential campaign and marketing: the immigrant community and persons who are trans.

And this matters to us, as we are finding our place in this moment as a community of God's justice and mercy.

We see how the intensifying activity of Immigration and Customs Enforcement — ICE — already is sending fear throughout communities, including right here in Greensboro. The early orders do not speak of compassionate and reasonable immigration reform, but a notion that undocumented immigrants are a threat.

As a congregation, we are active in ministry to immigrants and refugees, including those who are undocumented. We do this through our denominational partnerships with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, through local organizations like Faith Action International, New Arrivals Institute, Church World Service… all of whom are bracing for the best way to support. And we as a church must consider the same.

You'll notice that this week's orders change a long-standing practice that declared ICE would not pursue people in sensitive areas like schools, like hospitals and like churches. That is no longer the case. And the willingness to so immediately undo what had been a widely held sense of humanity, decorum and sanctuary is for so many in our community of care and friendship a harrowing sign of what is to come.

Our school system is actively considering how to support families amid these changes, including what can and cannot happen in a public school building. And we as a church must do the same, having in place policies and practices that provide the safety and sanctuary of our God to those siblings of ours who are immigrants, recognizing, in the words of scripture, that "we were all once strangers." Recognizing that another word for immigrant is "neighbor" or "child of God." And remembering the God who calls us to bring freedom and good news, most especially to those at risk

Which includes this week those among us who are transgender. And that means beloved members of this church, among them young people who have grown up in this church and heard the love of God whispered and sung over them for the whole of their lives. And this week, they are experiencing messages and orders that say you can't travel, you can't identify, but that suggest something even broader, that is, that you can't exist.

And this matters deeply to us, because trans persons have heard this message their whole lives. Among transgender adults, 44 percent reported recent ideation of death by suicide, and seven percent reported recently attempting it. And according to the Trevor Project, an advocacy organization for LGBTQ+ youth, when anti-trans legislation has been proposed, an increase in suicide attempt rates among young people 13-24 rose by anywhere from 38 to 44 percent.

For decades, churches and church traditions have been declaring where they stand in relation to those who are LGBTQ+. For when there are particular cases of exclusion, Christian community has the chance to be just as particular with its inclusion and affirmation. Various denominations have done this. But as you know, among Baptists, it is a declaration for the local church to make. And it is one which our church has reflected on in a variety of ways over years. We have come to see why it is important to be clear, and to pronounce who we are. We have done this practically, as in last year demonstrating that we will call to ministry people in the fullness of who they are, including people of all sexualities and gender identities. But our church wants to share that more fully and precisely.

We have come to see why it is important to be clear, and to pronounce who we are. We have done this practically, as in last year demonstrating that we will call to ministry people in the fullness of who they are, including people of all sexualities and gender identities.

In discerning how to do that, we felt best to come to our deacons, those we acknowledge on this ordination day as servant-leaders, interpreters of our life together, truth-tellers in our midst. On one hand, there was nothing specific to do — we are who we are; there are no policies to change, no by-laws to amend. But discerning the best way to be clear, we began a process

of working on a statement of inclusion and affirmation that our church can rightly claim. This process started in the fall, with representatives from our deacons working together with pastoral staff, sharing a draft with the larger deacon body, editing and improving and discussing until just this month, voting on a statement for our church to claim. The vote was taken two weeks ago, and in the room full of deacons, the statement was unanimously affirmed. As one deacon observed, it was remarkable to see such a vote without incident, almost as though it were an acknowledgment of what was already true. That is, as the statement reads: "We believe that our church is more faithful to God's calling when we include and celebrate all people. We therefore affirm and welcome people of all sexualities and gender identities to participate fully in the life and leadership of our community of faith, including the sacred practices of baptism, communion, marriage, ministry and ordination."

There is a time to declare who you are, and what you believe, and what you will be about. For Jesus, it was that day in Nazareth. And if we leave Nazareth just a few verses later and follow Jesus around in the gospel of Luke, we can see he meant what he said when he talked about good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. At every turn, he seems to find his way to them.

It's all too much for the hometown crowd, of course. They rush Jesus out of town. They seem to want the message to remain hypothetical or fantastic, where it doesn't disturb them. And they want Jesus to remain the carpenter's son, who is easier on the ears, lighter on the conscience, and always so polite. The message is too much. And the people respond immediately. Their reflex is to push it off in the distance, and even to rush Jesus out of town until they nearly run him off a cliff. And while they fail on the hill outside Nazareth, there is a hill outside Jerusalem where the bold words and actions of Jesus would finally incite the rage not only of a town, but of an entire empire.

Make no mistake, it is risky. It is bold. The justice and mercy of God always are. But they are much more than we can ever find if we just stay in Nazareth.

So, friends, may we take a breath. May we feel the strength of the Spirit that is with us. May we walk to the front. May we stand straight and tall. And may we find our place, where Jesus found his. ■

Alan Sherouse is the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Greensboro, NC, where he preached this sermon on January 27, 2025. He gave permission to publish it in Christian Ethics Today. To listen to an audio and video recording, see: https://youtu.be/PcNGE5d0ukA. Pastor Sherouse is a graduate of Wake Forest University Divinity School.

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