

The Crazy Quilt of white christian nationalism

ORUCC

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s230212

Amos 5:21-24

Luke 4:16-21

resources: Heyward, The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism
Cooper-White, The Psychology of Christian Nationalism

I. intro.

How many of you have heard the term ‘white christian nationalism’? I’m guessing many of you have, even if you don’t have a clear understanding of what it is. According to sociologists, more liberal and progressive people are more likely to know of the term. More conservative people are less likely to be familiar with the label even though, at this time, they are more likely to hold white christian nationalist positions. Lest you worry that it might be considered a derogatory term (it’s meant to be descriptive, non-evaluative) at least one member of congress was selling T-shirts imprinted “Proud White Christian Nationalist.”

White christian nationalism might seem at first like a blanket term that has been made up (by liberals/progressives?). White christian nationalism encompasses a whole panoply of issues that might not appear to have much, if anything, in common. Police murdering black men and women; arguments at local school board meetings about rest room use, about gender and sports teams, about curricula that mention race and slavery; images of God as patriarchal and authoritarian; diversity and inclusion efforts by colleges and universities and businesses; exploitation of the natural resources of the earth, climate warming; violence in our societies, wars and rumors of wars; the subtle influence of consumerist capitalism on our psyches; arguments about the Christian faith, or lack thereof, of the ‘Founding Fathers.’ A trivia tidbit: Did

you know that Thomas Jefferson went through a copy of the Bible and cut out all of the passages he didn't like? Yeah, things like miracles and other verses he didn't think met his tests of rationality and enlightenment.

I could go on adding to the list. It's by no means inclusive. Fill in what you think I have missed. That's a very diverse list of issues. It's crazy to try to put them all under one blanket term, like maybe white christian nationalism.

Blanket doesn't work here as a metaphor. But I think that crazy quilt does.

[slide 1]

One of the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of crazy involves irregular patterns, as in paving or in quilts. This has nothing to do with people and how they act. In this context, crazy means not having a regular pattern.

This is a crazy quilt made by Alice's great, great grandmother, also named Alice. She did a late 18th century grand tour of Europe, collecting pieces of fabric from many of the places she visited. We have a copy of a journal she wrote with all the details of where she purchased the material. When she got home, it took her about ten years to make the quilt.

[slide 2]

Here are some details of the quilt pieces. Notice the different shapes, subjects, and stitching.

[slides 3, 4, 5] Women dancing, a violinist, a person in a bonnet with blue eyes.

[slides 6, 7] Flowers

[slides 8, 9] Birds

[slide 10] House

[slide 11] Thistle, a node to Scottish ancestry

[slide 12] back to the larger view

A crazy quilt does not have the regular patterns of most quilts. Its irregular, helter-skelter appearance is part of its charm. It draws you in as you try to make some sense of it. This crazy quilt does not have any two patches alike; they're all different. Different fabrics, different patterns and scenes on the patches, and I can't count how many different stitches are used putting them together. Animals and nature; people, adults and children; music notes and a violinist; a house.

Even if it's not from your family, you can get lots of warm fuzzies from a quilt like this. It can bring back memories, memories of family and of innocence.

And that's what the crazy quilt of white christian nationalism does too. (Most people don't have the visceral negative reaction that I do.) It appeals to an imagined era of faith and family and innocence that is very appealing, very attractive - especially if the world around you seems so different, so threatening, so unfair.

II.

The crazy quilt of disparate issues I mentioned a few minutes ago is held together by some powerful symbols. The ones that concern me most are the Christian symbols and distorted belief systems purporting to be Christian. But I shouldn't get ahead of myself.

Some deep and deeply held convictions are the stitches that hold together the crazy quilt of white christian nationalism, that that ground that disparate list of issues.

The most recent survey of white christian nationalist convictions and attitudes, released just this past Wednesday, measured how much people agreed or disagreed with five statements:

- The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation.
- U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.
- If the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.
- Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
- God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Robert P. Jones, founder and president to the research organization (PRRI, Public Religion Research Institute) issuing the report this week, wrote a good summary: “Christian nationalism is a new term for a worldview that has been with us since the founding of our country – the idea that America is destined to be a promised land for European Christians. While most Americans today embrace pluralism and reject this anti-democratic claim, majorities of white evangelical Protestants and Republicans remain animated by this vision of a white Christian America.”

Newsweek and the Washington Post’s Jennifer Rubin are among those in the news media reacting to the results of this survey and sounding alarms for the future of our democracy. They are and will be joined by countless others, too many for me to keep up with. There are lots of concerns about the political implications of the influence of white christian nationalism.

But I have seen almost nothing in the media about the religious, spiritual, and theological aspects of white christian nationalist convictions.

III.

We're in a church sanctuary, virtually and physically. I'm a preacher. You're attending a worship service where one of the things we do, to use somewhat archaic sounding language, is glorify and give thanks to God. We ponder what God's presence means in our lives, in our public lives as well as our person, private lives. This is a safe place to talk about religious, spiritual, and theological questions. We have a responsibility, a duty, as people of faith, as people of the Christian faith, to address these issues in the society and culture surrounding us and that we participate in.

One of the touchstones of our faith is scripture. As Christians, we affirm our responsibility to be in conversation with both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. We heard short passages from each a few minutes ago. Both connect our concerns for social justice with the core of our faith.

Amos apparently knew some pompous preachers. He didn't like them and thought God didn't either. Our religious rituals, which we can get so obsessed about, ultimately don't mean much, according to Amos. Justice and righteousness are much more important. I love the image in this Jewish Study Bible translation of justice bubbling up - like a spring or an artesian well, naturally pouring forth out of the earth. Justice and righteousness, our relationships to and actions toward and with others, are for Amos the heart of faith and spirituality. Treating others with justice and righteous, not to mention common respect and basic dignity, matter to God and to Amos and should matter to us as well.

Our little slice of Luke's gospel has Jesus attending his hometown synagogue reading a scripture passage from Isaiah. Jesus sits down, the customary position for preaching in his time

and place, and makes the extravagant claim that Isaiah's words have just been fulfilled. What Jesus is doing is adopting Isaiah's vision as his own personal mission statement, to use contemporary terminology. Good news to the poor, release to the captives, oppressed go free, etc. We don't have to ask What would Jesus do? In a general sense, we already know. In one word: love.

So, scripture is one touchstone for Christian faith.

IV.

Another touchstone is our heritage of the faithful souls who have gone before us. Based on their conversations with our shared scriptures, they developed a vocabulary, words to articulate parts of our faith, and a quite large cluster of ideas. While acknowledging that many of these words and ideas have been used in hurtful ways, we also need, I think, to recover the ideas and spiritual realities these old words refer to.

We need to recover two words in particular to talk about white christian nationalism. The first is: sin.

I know; I can see some eyes rolling. Been there, done that. Finally escaped. No longer letting myself get beaten into submission by a tyrant wielding 'sinner' like a club. That's not what I want. That is abusive, using theological words as weapons.

However... There is a spiritual reality about ourselves that we need to recognize. We are not perfect. We mess up. Oh, we might try to bluster through while knowing inside that it eats at our soul. Or we might think over and over about how terrible and unloveable we are. The spiritual/theological word for this reality is sin.

Our traditions in the UCC are familiar with these spiritual dynamics. UCC orders of service, along with Congregational and E&R services (they're the predecessor denominations of the UCC), all included confessions of sin and assurances of pardon. I grew up in the E&R part of the UCC in Pennsylvania. Every service had confession and assurance. I grew up knowing I would mess up, either actively or passively or both, and that God forgave and accepted and loved me for who I was. That moment can be quite powerful for a person who feels unloved. I've heard that message from parishioners and visitors who weren't sure they were good enough to face God. The assurance of God's pardon and love can be a revelation and an awakening.

The concept of sin in our traditional confessions is more than just personal and private wrongs. The bigger sins are social, the ways our society and culture encourage and even press us to treat other children of God as less than ourselves; the ways that social patterns lock us into exploitative or subservient relationships with others.

I think the more successful we are in worldly terms, the more we need regular reminders that our good fortune, at least in our current system, too often comes at a cost for someone else. We need confession and our promise to re-examine and do better, along with the re-affirmation that God loves us.

The second potentially controversial word we need to recover from the past and rehabilitate is: heresy. A heresy is an idea or practice that is outside the realm of Christian faith even though its adherents may claim otherwise.

This is especially difficult for people who like to think of themselves as tolerant, open-minded, accepting, welcoming of all. It can be hard for us to take a definite stand because we

don't want to offend anyone. We don't draw boundary lines because we don't want to fence anyone out.

Yet there comes a time – a time to say “Here I stand. I can do no other.” (Martin Luther) A time like that came in South Africa as the evils of apartheid were more and more widely discussed around the world. The Reformed Church of South Africa, the church of the white settlers and oppressors, after heated discussion and deliberation voted to declare the doctrine of apartheid to be heretical to the Christian faith. This was a key moment in the crumbling of apartheid, and enabled the eventual work of a truth and reconciliation commission. (Another historical tidbit: just a year or so ago, a UCC missionary of three generations ago was honored by the present government of South Africa for his work planting the seeds that grew into the anti-apartheid movement.)

The church in the United States faces a similar crisis time. White christian nationalism is a heresy; it is beyond the bounds of Christianity. When a people's ultimate loyalties are to race (white) or to nation, that people is no longer 'Christian' in any meaningful sense. And we who uphold the grand and broad traditions of Christian faith are called to speak out against heresy. This call to name heresy does not come often. When it does come, we respond strongly and the church grows in faithfulness. When heresy festers, the church decays internally, and justice and love suffer.

V.

The book *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* lists seven ways white christian nationalism is sinful, along with seven calls to action in response. Our study

during and after Lent will examine each sin and call to action in more detail. Here I can only list them. Remember the crazy quilt analogy; this is not a neat list.

sin	action
1. Lust for Omnipotence	Empowering One Another
2. Entitlement	Embodying Humility
3. White Supremacy	Approaching the Blackness of God
4. Misogyny	Empowering Women, Celebrating Sexuality, Affirming Gender Diversity
5. Capitalist Spirituality	Transforming Capitalism
6. Domination of the Earth and Its Creatures	Belonging with Earth and Animals
7. Violence	Breaking the Spiral of Violence

The sins of white christian nationalism have been nurtured by the same environment in which we too live and move and have our being. It would be unreasonable to think naively that we can escape the effects of the polluted air we breathe. With confession and repentance we can be strengthened for renewed action, knowing God loves us.

VI. concl.

I have put a lot on the table this morning. More than a sermon usually should. I hope I got you thinking. I hope I challenged you to ask questions. This is a much larger topic than one sermon, or even one study group.

You are invited to continue the conversation begun here on Tuesdays 10:30-12 during Lent and the two Tuesdays after Easter.

We offer an alternative Christianity to the false promises of white christian nationalism. We share a faith of forgiveness, understanding, openness, relationships, love in all its different forms. A faith of deep spiritual and theological conversations, of faithful friendships, of unlimited hospitality.

Amen