

**FRONT ROW SEAT TO NEW LIFE; LUKE 10:1-11, 16-20; JULY 3, 2016;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Two hundred and forty years ago yesterday the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia to formally adopt a resolution for independence from Great Britain.

The vote was unanimous with, interestingly, *New York* abstaining. The colonies had been warring with England for over a year because of steep taxes plus the fact that they were being ruled by a king an ocean away.

Some wanted to remain under British rule but most did not. Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*, which sold over 500k copies, generated a groundswell of support for independence. Among his observations, Paine also noted that the King was a brute.

A month prior to passage of the resolution to leave Great Britain, when the resolution was first presented to Congress on June 5, a committee of five including John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin was appointed for the purpose of drafting what became The Declaration of Independence.

Adams proposed Jefferson as chief writer because, Adams, in his own words was 'obnoxious, suspect and unpopular' but Jefferson much the opposite.

Jefferson wrote the document in just seventeen days on a small, portable writing desk of his own design and manufacture. The final draft was approved, after minor tinkering from the committee, on July 4.ⁱ

Fast forward to election year of 2016. Democracy is rarely a neat and tidy business. I remember hearing the House of Commons debate some controversial issue and was appalled at the beer hall nature of the shouting and disagreement.

Indeed, we here in the US regularly give the world a remarkable display of rude and crude governing. From our own Congress to some of the candidates for elected office including those running for President, our public discourse seems well below the level of debate and discussion of our founders.

While they used language every bit as colorful as anyone since, it was their grasp of and attention to great ideas that distinguished them.

Sam Tanenhaus wrote, in a recent essay and review of eight new books that offer insight into the present political climate, that the low-ebb of populist anger and political posturing we are now witnessing is not unique to us but has strong precedent in our national history.

The presidential elections of 1976, 1968 and 1936 also experienced among them split parties, chaos and violence and populist rage manipulated by authoritarian candidates for office.

I want to explore with you on this Fourth of July weekend not just the historical context in which the political pendulum of the nation swings but also the cultural landscape in which we work out for better or worse our life together.

And central to that cultural reality that shapes us as a nation is the role of religion and religious institutions like Westminster.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. for example, commenting on the presidential election of 1936 wrote that the populist audience for that election mostly came from “the old lower-middle classes, in an unprecedented stage of frustration and fear [and] menace[d] by humiliation, dispossession and poverty.”

“They came,” he said, “from provincial and traditionally nonpolitical groups, jolted from apathy into near hysteria by the shock of economic collapse.”

“And,” he continues, “many also came from the evangelical denominations in which years of bible reading and fundamentalist revivalism accustomed them to millennial solutions.”ⁱⁱ

If you go back to the beginning of the republic and earlier – the popular narratives that drove the push to the new world, shaped the identity of the young nation and served as a moral compass for the national consciousness were biblically based stories and values.

Ideas like identifying the North American wilderness as the new Eden, and the first colonialists as the new Adam, and the new nation as God’s chosen people called to be a light to all the nations – a city on a hill – manifesting a destiny ordained by God in this new promised land for the purpose of redeeming a corrupt Old World Europe – all of these images and themes if not world views were fashioned by 18th and 19th century religious and political leaders – especially during the First and Second Great Awakenings.

If the new nation was not technically Christian given the new constitution’s allowance for freedom of religious expression and allusions to the deistic nature of God in our Constitution and Bill of Rights, *the popular narrative of our origin and purpose* were clearly Judeo-Christian biblical themes adapted by and for religious dissidents who settled the land and then popular preachers who perpetuated the mantle of God’s blessing upon our national experiment.

Until recently, it has been hard to separate our national identity from Christian values and ideals. But today we are the most religiously diverse nation in the world and for the first time there is a decline in those claiming any religious affiliation.

Gallup’s annual poll still documents a high degree of identification of the population with belief in God, the practice of prayer and church attendance.

Indeed, the numbers of self-identified practicing Christians has remained impressively high especially compared to developed nations.

But times change. If you were around in the ‘50s, the post WWII baby boom era, you remember how full virtually every church sanctuary was; and, how white, or black since Christian churches then and now remain mostly racially segregated.

Prior to 1960 the Presbyterian Church was known as the Republican Party at Prayer. A designation that today would not be even close to accurate.

It was in the ‘60s that the breakdown of the old Protestant, Catholic, Jew definition of the nation’s predominant religious bodies gave way to the defining characteristic of religious communities not by faith tradition but as politically liberal or conservative.

The importance of this restructuring of American religion is hard to overestimate. It enabled the election of our first Catholic President in 1960, our first born again President in 1976 and fueled the anti-war and civil rights movements. After that, it formed a powerful coalition of religiously and politically conservative groups and voters that elected Ronald Reagan in 1980 and served as voting blocks that ushered George Herbert Bush, Bill Clinton and George Walker Bush into office.

But times change. Just this month, a new study by Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute titled *The End of White Protestant America* marks a major shift in the religious and political fabric of the country. Jones' work, based on extensive survey and interview data, documents that white Protestants are no longer the American majority and the cultural and institutional world they built no longer sits at the center of American public life.

In 1993, for example, the year Bill Clinton took office, 51% of Americans identified as white Protestants. In 2014, that percentage dropped to 32. Not to mention millennials who stream for the church exit, turned off by intolerant 'anti-gay teachings' thundered from many evangelical pulpits. Those church-goers left behind, Jones writes, stew in the bitter juices of 'cultural loss' and yearn for yesterday.

Jones' research tracks increasing feelings of nostalgia and unease in a world fraught with terrorist violence and vulnerable economies.

He documents longing among growing numbers of white Americans for a simpler time, protection from foreign threat and influence and a preference among many for more authoritarian leaders; even leaders who are willing to break the rules in dealing with these issues.

Hand in hand with the shrinkage of white Protestant America is a growing opinion representing the majority among white evangelicals, Republicans and Trump supporters that white Americans are as discriminated against as black and minority Americans. Only 39% of the general population holds the same view.ⁱⁱⁱ

My hunch is many of us might have guessed or predicted the trends Jones documents but to see what were the cultural wars morph into this new phase of race and class difference so rapidly and virulently, especially in this year's presidential campaign is something of a wake up call.

Responses range from the atheists who rejoice at any dent in the cultural credibility and authority of the church to many congregations and church leaders in the mode of retreat and survive who condemn a society gone astray from Christian values and now lobby in the wake of gay rights for church-sanctioned bigotry under the euphemism of 'religious liberty.'

But have you noticed that Westminster and congregations like us do not fit the reactionary trends of a shrinking white Protestant population? This morning's story of Jesus sending out of the Seventy to gather the harvest of new believers offers a compelling charge for progressive mainline churches in America like us.

This story appears only in Luke, devoted to the downtrodden and outcast who, unlike bickering disciples or clueless religious authorities, “get the faith.” Culturally displaced white, progressive Protestant Americans may be able to relate.

Jesus himself says, “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” We understand that the laborers are few, but where, we might ask, is this harvest if we see a white Protestant church shrinking and disappearing?

It is worth remembering that while Luke is speaking to those who are mostly outcast because of their disease or gender or occupation or economic status or ethnic identity they are nevertheless a diverse audience. The ones he appeals to, to go into the field and reap the harvest, represent the diversity of the human family.

I had breakfast last week with a good friend who is a white Pentecostal pastor of two congregations of African immigrants. Bob walks the walk. He is fond of quoting Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian liberation theologian and priest who said that the test of mission and ministry is our friendship with the poor.

A landmark book titled, *When Helping Hurts* published in 2009 elaborates on Gutierrez’s friendship test for mission. Poverty will change, the authors say, depending on who is defining it. While the poor will define poverty more in social terms, wealthy churches, by definition most white Protestants, define poverty as a lack of material things or geographical location.

This creates a harmful cycle where mission is seen as a top down doling out of material resources (which reinforces a sense of inferiority and lack of self-esteem among the poor) rather than a true partnership in which both parties give and take. WEDI is a model for this kind of mission. The more members a congregation deploys (which is another word for what Jesus did sending the Seventy), the more that congregation will thrive and reap a great harvest.

We are in a very different place as Presbyterians in 2016 than 1968 or 1950. Much has stayed the same – this beautiful sanctuary, our Aeolian Skinner organs, our traditional worship; but tectonic shifts have changed the culture and face of America.

People no longer stream into our sanctuary because it is the only option on a Sunday morning; nor can we focus only on political causes without paying attention to the spiritual needs that sustain us.

William Barber, the North Carolina preacher we’re going to Chautauqua on August 3rd to hear is, many say, a new Martin Luther King, Jr. He is calling for a fusion, a fellowship, a friendship in Gutierrez’s terms, of like-minded, diverse people; an ‘e pluribus unum’ of black and white; Democrat, Republican, Independent; poor, affluent; gay, straight to rebuild the nation around moral values that reject exclusion from the ballot box or payroll or opportunity because of skin color or sexual orientation or religious persuasion. This is the new harvest Jesus is sending us out to reap. White Protestant churches who have ears to hear let them hear. If old Tom Jefferson were with us today, he’d say, ‘that’s what we had in mind from the start.’ Amen.

ⁱ Garrison Keillor, *Writer's Almanac*, July 2, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Sam Tanenhaus, "Why Populism Now?" *The New York Times Book Review*, Sunday June 26, 2016, p 14-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tanenhaus.