

JESUS CROSSES THE COLOR LINE; MATTHEW 15:10-20, 21-28; AUGUST 20, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINTSER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The events in Charlottesville one week ago were like opening the lid of Pandora's Box. The Greek poet, Hesiod, said Pandora opened, out of curiosity, a jar (falsely translated box) given to her that contained all the evils of the world and as the demons escaped they taunted her as she tried in vain to close the jar.

Most white Americans take for granted the privileges that come with being white and are generally blind to the institutionalized disadvantages that people of color must face everyday. These disadvantages impede the pathway to success, yet many whites continue to conveniently dismiss and stereotype the lack of success for people of color as the result of character flaws.

That our culture tolerates such deeply rooted white supremacist attitudes encourages the hard-core violence we witnessed last Saturday; a blatant racism that was on display during the president's campaign, and that has been increasingly visible since his election. Not to mention many GOP office holders fearful of losing votes in 2018 who try to distance themselves from him without condemning his views.

The spectacle of armed, uniformed white men marching down the streets of Charlottesville and at the University of Virginia, carrying Nazi flags, chanting Nazi slogans, shouting "Heil Hitler!" and "Heil Trump!" were like the demons escaping Pandora's jar, taunting the residents of Charlottesville, as their hate speech escaped into cyberspace and the global media.

Reports from Charlottesville astound. Brian MacLaren, evangelical activist, was there to resist the violence; he said, at age 61, having participated in many marches and demonstrations, he has never seen such shameless, chest thumping hubris, misogyny, racism, and anti-Semitism.

MacLaren also reported broad representation of church and religious leaders who denounced the white supremacists. Included were leaders from a Roman Catholic cardinal and bishop to some evangelical preachers who prayed with Trump in the Oval Office. When it comes to racism, one said, there is only one side: to stand against it.ⁱ

In a recent conversation, my mentor said he is reminded of Germany in the 1930s when Hitler's rhetoric appealed to enough people – thugs at first who became his quasi-uniformed brown shirts like the camo-clad white supremacists last weekend--

But then rallied a nation considered the pinnacle of culture (yet lacking strong leaders) behind a movement that offered face-saving revenge for the suffering imposed on the Axis powers by the Treaty of Versailles after WWI. While 1934 and 2017 are vastly different, there are striking parallels.

White supremacist ideology flourishes among an angry base fearful of losing dominance and privilege to persons of color; in addition, many less radicalized whites continue to be unwilling to acknowledge their own racial privilege that, under the current leadership in the White House, creates social space for radical, even violent racial hatred.

Where all this will lead is an open question. In this strange political season events are conspiring to either flush out the deeply rooted remnants of colonialism or to succumb to its dark agenda of oppression.

Perhaps it took a president aligned with such values to embolden radical racism to surface publically. The inevitable collision with democratic values that oppose such views is now taking place. Along with climate change, the redistribution of wealth in the US and economic development in poor nations – racial equity and pluralism are *the critical issues* upon which the survival of our democracy and nation depend.

Activist Lisa Sharon Harper says the forces at work in Charlottesville last weekend go back to colonialism; white male property owners had the right to vote and hold office which was given in name to blacks after the Civil War but prevented from being exercised by Jim Crow laws and poll taxes; the 1965 Voter Rights Act ensured the black vote in eight southern states but was not renewed by the Supreme Court in 2013, so blacks are yet again disenfranchised at the ballot box.ⁱⁱ

It's hard to refute: Europeans claimed the land; subdued and herded the native population, settled and built the nation on the backs of millions of African slaves; the logic of colonization and white dominion over the laws and the land morphed, says Harper, from British taxes to black poll taxes; while plantations gave way to southern prison farms and more recently Nixon's War on Drugs criminalizing heroin incarcerates with long term sentences a generation of black men suffering from addiction who did not commit violent crimes.

Meanwhile the nativist policies of the administration seek to reduce legal immigration by nearly half – precisely the way the ancestors of nearly everyone in this room got to this nation in the first place.

The good news is the white turnout in Charlottesville last weekend. Many church folks, indeed many of you, are dissatisfied with the passivity of the white church in the face of ongoing, rising racial injustice and violence.

Harper, a black woman, who grew up as an evangelical realized that the theology she was learning, the hymns she was singing and the prayers she was hearing would have offered nothing to address the inhumane suffering and injustice of her slave ancestors in Virginia and South Carolina.

“Anything in my evangelical church that was ‘beyond the witness of the gospel’, she said, “was considered ‘extra-curricular.’” “The exploitation of people, voter disenfranchisement, the breaking up of families through mass deportation – all extra-curricular.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So what do the disturbing events of last weekend have to do with the story of the Canaanite woman? Pretty much everything.

If Jesus' ministry was expanded in the early church by those who fed and clothed the hungry and naked,
then his gospel was carried beyond its narrow racial and geographical boundaries by this woman from Tyre and Sidon – considered a pagan.

What happens in this episode is that the fear of the other is confronted and broken. Unlike Mark, where the story originates, Matthew adds the presence of the disciples who represent the church – in Matthew’s case this is the Jewish church.

William Willimon in his book *Fear of the Other* says “xenophobic is exclusionary fear of the other; more than a preference for people whom we enjoy hanging out with and feel most comfortable around. In deep fear of the other we separate ourselves from others in order to better oppress, exploit, expulse, confine, hurt or deny justice and access to others we have judged to be beyond the bounds of having any bond between us or any claim upon us.”

“A subtext,” Willimon goes on, “of recent debates over whether or not to admit refugees has been, ‘If we let them in, what’s the cost? Will our nation be less secure? Will these newcomers help or hinder the economy? Who will they vote for? Will our property values drop?’”

In today’s story Jesus “withdraws” from threatening Pharisees in Palestine, to Tyre and Sidon a region occupied by the Canaanites, the archetypal enemies of the Jews, considered racially mixed and religiously unclean. His interaction with the woman is startling in that it reverses the usual order of Jesus being confronted with hostile questioning to which he gives poignant and clever answers; and makes Jesus the hostile responder to the witty and wise woman.

At first, Jesus ignores the woman as she approaches him shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.” The disciples – judging that there is “no bond between them and the woman or claim she has upon them” – urge Jesus to send her away. Indeed, Jesus says, “I was sent only for the house of Israel”; a response, scholars say is aimed at reassuring Matthew’s primarily Jewish audience that Jesus’ ministry does not deviate from or violate the original covenant of God’s people with Yahweh.

But the woman persists; she kneels before Jesus and says again, “Lord, help me” to which Jesus responds with what the commentators say is a snide rebuke and says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” – implying that his ministry is not for those outside the covenant of the chosen people. But the woman checkmates Jesus, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table.” Jesus finally relents and says, “Your faith is great; let it be done for you as you wish.”

The core of this little exchange is the woman’s persistence and Jesus’ willingness to listen and to include her in the circle of God’s blessing. Yet, in the moment before Jesus acts – either to agree with the disciples to send the woman away or to recognize her request and grant healing for her daughter, *in that moment* the future of the church hangs in the balance.

In these verses, the early church is taking shape before our very eyes. Jesus’ dialogue with the woman shapes the church into a bigger, welcoming fellowship beyond the narrow geographical and theological boundaries of Israel; Jesus does not desert the historic mission of the covenant of God with Israel nor does he abandon the Canaanite woman; rather, he creates a church, a community, big enough for both.

The future of the church in American, and perhaps it is not too much to say the future of the nation, is hanging in the balance right now. Some pundits and pollsters reported that the election of 2016 was the 'last gasp,' the 'death rattle' of white Christianity in the United States. Indeed, candidate Trump's message to his white Christian audiences was, "I am your last chance. The nation is at a precipice; we must step back from the cliff to preserve our way of life and power.

In an interview with Pat Robertson Mr. Trump said, "If we don't win this election, you'll never see another Republican and you'll have a whole different church structure. This is the last chance of winning because you're going to have people flowing across the border, you're going to have illegal immigrants coming in and they're going to be legalized and they're going to be able to vote and once that happens you can forget it." No wonder he received the highest turnout of evangelical voters – over 80% and over 60% of white Catholic voters.

Michele Bachman a member of Trump's evangelical advisory board echoed the same sentiments and asked, "Who but Donald Trump will stand up for godly moral principles? This is it."^{iv}

Yet, whether the election of 2016 represents the 'last gasp' of white Christianity in America is yet to be determined. Given the events in Charlottesville and the acceptance of radical racism in high places white Christians of moral conscience can no longer remain passive, neutral or disengaged from the aims of white supremacists.

Their agenda, to roll back the progress we have made as a pluralistic democracy and reassert white colonialism over people of color, is a hideous rejection of the gospel, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution; nor can this extremism be tolerated under the guise of freedom of speech or freedom of religion – as several cases now approaching the Supreme Court claim.

David Brooks says that it's not just fear of the other we suffer from at present but a general anxiety that translates into a fear of everything. Without institutions to trust, unattached to compelling religions and sources of meaning, plus demographic shifts and technological disruption our society is adrift in a sea of anxiety.^v

Candidate Trump gave people a quick pass out of anxiety. Everything could be blamed on foreigners, the idiotic elites and a series of conspiracy theories attacking his opponents based on lies and disproven myths.

The task for churches and white Christians is to connect with the image of God within us and the moral claim of God upon us to reject 21st century colonialism from hooded white supremacists to federal policies that limit the American opportunity and dream to a single, select racial group.

At the bottom of Pandora's jar, after the demons escaped, was "elpis" in the Greek, translated "hope." It is easier to deal with the devil we know than the devil we don't; there will be more Charlottesville's. Yet, our hope and help is no less than the Jesus of Matthew 15:28 who expanded God's covenant to include a foreigner, a woman of color; who until that moment the church thought it could ignore. Amen.

ⁱ Brian MacLaren, “What I Saw In Charlottesville,” Auburn Seminary website, 8/18/17.

ⁱⁱ Lisa Sharon Harper, “Will America Pick Up Its Cross?” Auburn Seminary, website, 8/18/17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Emma Green, “How Will the Church Reckon With Charlottesville?” Atlantic.com/politics 8/18/17.

^v David Brooks, “Finding a Way To Roll Back Fanaticism,” *The New York Times*, 8/15/17, A23.