

Make America Godly Again

July 14, 2019

Let's start today with these words from the great African American poet, Langston Hughes, written in 1935:

*Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.*

(America never was America to me.)

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.*

(It never was America to me.)

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

*(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")*

...

*For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.
O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every one is free.*

...

*The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!*

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

*Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!*

So, my title for today, which you may have noted on our sign out front or in the bulletin, is, perhaps, a bit of a tease. Make America Godly Again? Not again—has it ever been? We've had our moments, and our movements, but I'm a historian, and nostalgia is an emotion exploited by demagogues to stoke resentment and to divide people.

The godly founders of Union Church in Green Bay had few illusions about the state of America's soul. Hear this report from an early member in the 1840s. He was a young man who graduated from Dartmouth College and came to Green Bay as a school-teacher. He wrote to his mother, in Vermont, about life in Green Bay:

"Here in the West we are barbarous without any barbaric virtues of an earlier time [aside—what would be barbaric virtues, I ask?] Anyway, he continues: "Those virtues have been supplanted by the vices of civilization and we are in a deplorable state (those two words underlined), loaded down with the vices of both barbarism and civilization, with none of the virtues of either.

The boys of the town—I know of hardly an exception—are idle, shockingly profane, fond of loafing about the saloons, drinking when they can get liquor and thinking only of having a wild time. A six year old boy was drunk on the streets the other day. Many families do not send their children to school at all.

The present generation is growing up ignorant, lazy, dissipated, with no ambition except for money and a wild time. I don't know what will become of the country when the present generation of youth get possession of the reins of government. Corruption is rife now; it will be rampant (underlined) then."

And we thought baby boomers were bad news...

When we remember the past accurately, we can remember that at the time of the Civil War, about 2% of the U.S. population finished high school, and as many as 20% of the adult population was illiterate—1 out of 5 people couldn't read or write. Prior to the Civil War,

maybe 10% of the U.S. population regularly attended church—some estimates put the percentage of U.S. church attendance prior to the Great Awakenings of the 1830s and 1850s at 5%.

So, it's not like there's some totally godly American past that we can just recall—the glory days of when the Pilgrims were merciful to Native Americans and people lived by the golden rule. Never been the case.

And if you want to understand why churches grew dramatically after the Civil War, you need to understand that churches provided real services to people that made their lives substantially, materially, better: reading (and advocating for strong public or private schools); healthcare (most hospitals were begun and in many cases administered by nuns or deaconesses); and social services—food, housing, sanitation, and much more. The temptation to imagine “godliness” as some kind of piety set apart from worldly and material needs is one of the devil’s most clever ruses. A godly America would be a generous, and merciful, America. A godly America would weave into our policies practices like those of the Good Samaritan who healed a stranger, housed a stranger, and shared resources with a stranger. Make America Godly Again—like that.

One of the books I finished reading on my recent 4th of July trip to Philly to celebrate our friends’ retirement was a book written by a student of mine, Lenny Duncan. Lenny is a formerly incarcerated African American queer male in recovery who gained his GED and BA while in jail, and then came to seminary after connecting with a socially-and-racially progressive Lutheran church in Philly. He’s now a pastor in Brooklyn. I remember Lenny’s first day in my Introduction to Public Theology class, when he stood up to introduce himself—tattoo sleeves on both arms, and big earlobe rings in both ears. He wasn’t your typical seminarian, and I was pleased to be able to mentor him during his three years of classwork.

Anyway, Lenny’s book is entitled *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to America’s Whitest Denomination*. It’s written to Lutherans, but it could be applied to the UCC, too. One of its chapters is entitled “Resisting White Nationalism is the Way of Jesus.” Another is “The Church is Queer.” *Dear Church* is a clarion call to end white supremacy, which Lenny also finds at the root of queerphobia, transphobia, toxic masculinity, and many of the other fears and reactions that lead to violence.

And Lenny puts it plainly: “Dear Church, the gospel is political. There are no two ways about it ... Jesus was using the same honorifics as Caesar, and he had to be keenly aware of the political ramifications of that. His ministry [was viewed] as insurrection under the colonial power of Rome, an empire that was built on the strict social structure of the patron/client system.... Jesus’ ministry tore this structure down and offered something completely different: a vision of a table where all could eat, no matter their status or identity.”

That vision, including its political activism, has always been a part of our church here in Green Bay, especially when it was growing. In my capacity as a historian, I’ve been gathering historical pictures and documents from the various closets where they’ve been housed for decades here at Union, sifting them, and finding some gems. One of them—which is also recalled in Ethel Cady’s history, is the reason we have this wood-cut of Abraham Lincoln hanging in our hallway. My guess is that this wood-cut has been in this church as long as any of you have been members. And, why? This picture is in our building because this was an abolitionist church.

And if you don't think abolitionism was controversial and political, well, we have to talk.

Some of you know well, some of you may never have heard, the story about how this church was part of the underground railroad. It was first recorded by Eliza Porter Chappell, the wife of Rev. Jeremiah Porter, who served this church from 1840 to 1858. A fugitive slave had been living among the Stockbridge tribe, but some slave catchers had discovered his whereabouts. This African American man had with him his three children. A letter from the pastor in Stockbridge asked Pastor Porter if he would temporarily house the fugitive. As Ms. Porter put it, this task had to be "*a secret service before the Lord, which, had we taken counsel of wise men in church and state, could not have been performed.*" And yet—"at midnight," Eliza Porter Chappell goes on, "*we were awakened by a knock at our window, and there stood the poor, trembling father, and three cold, hungry children. Our house was already full, and the boat was not in sight, and they feared that the pursuers were on their track. In a few hours many inquisitive eyes and ears would be open. Mr. Porter said, "Where can we hide them? In the icehouse? In the side closets of the parsonage?" I asked God of all wisdom and love and truth to direct, and during the act of prayer a text of scripture came to mind, which suggested the Church. "Yes, that is the place,"*" Mr. Porter replied, "*the belfry! They were warmed and fed, and comforted with the assurance that they were among friends, and then Mr. Porter took them to the SANCTUARY (in capital letters)—to the highest place in it.*" (end quote) There the family stayed for four days—until the congregation was able to arrange a sailboat to usher the family to the steamer Michigan, in which they then sailed to freedom in Canada.

And it was not only the Pastor's wife, the Pastor, and their family that were involved in this subversive political activity. Eliza reports that "*Mr. Robert Morris and Mr. Alonzo Kimball and families provided food. Several other persons provided money to pay for their passage. Mr. F. Lathrop provided the sailboat. Many people were gathered on the dock when the family reached the steamer. Those who saw the man's back at the church, remember distinctly that it was ridged with scars.*" Godliness happens when people work together for good.

And then Eliza adds her own little political commentary: "*When the barbarous Fugitive Slave Law was in force, and the more cruel law of [lynching] public opinion,*" she writes, "*it required no little courage to harbor a slave. Some of us would not have dared to do it; but we are all proud today that our belfry once proved a true sanctuary to the oppressed.*"

So there we have it. Make America Godly Again means being courageous enough to buck a barbarous law and to subvert even more cruel public opinion to provide sanctuary for the oppressed. That is our history. That is our present. That is our future. "From the first," Ethel Cady draws the conclusion, "the anti-slavery stand of the church was pronounced." And that's how Union Church grew—by taking a stand with and for the oppressed.

Our gospel story of the Good Samaritan today is a story of man scarred. Like most of Jesus' parables, the story invites us to identify with one character or another. Usually, Christians want to identify with the Samaritan—the one who does the right thing and serves as a neighbor to a neighbor in need.

Today, however, I want us to imagine ourselves as the one who is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. We are the wounded one. We are the traumatized one. We are the one left for dead by policies that fatten the rich and starve the poor. We are the one living in a toxic time

where the wounds come daily, repeatedly, as we listen to the news or scroll through our Twitter feed.

So, who is our neighbor? Where is the One who will heal our wounds? Where will we find the energy to reignite a spirit of courage?

God, Our Neighbor, is as close to us as our own breath.

God, the Living Spirit who animated Jesus, is as close to us as a gentle, summer breeze.

God, the Living Spirit who created the universe, is as close to us as the person sitting next to us, in front of us, behind us.

God, our Neighbor, is eager to heal whatever wounds you carry, and to restore you to full health.

God, our Neighbor, will not pass you by, but will attend to you with grace and mercy and compassion—giving you the energy to live courageously.

God, the Living Spirit, loves you.

Make America Godly Again?

Never hasn't been.

Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Luke 10:25-37
July 14, 2019