

July 2, 2017  
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

## The Death of Truth and the Life of the Church

Today is July 2. Come Tuesday, we will be observing the “Glorious Fourth.” It seems to this preacher that, whatever the lectionary might suggest, today is a day for preaching about our nation and our role as Christians within our nation.

Some will hear what follows as a “political” sermon. If that’s what you hear, you will be right. I hope what I am about to say will not be *partisan*, but it certainly will be *political*. Given the approaching celebration of Independence Day and the realities that confront you and me as dual citizens of heaven and of the United States, I find that I cannot keep silent.

I begin not with my words, but with the words of Professor Gary Dorrien, who teaches at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. Professor Dorrien begins his review of a recent book about 20<sup>th</sup> century tyranny by tracing the steps that have brought us to this moment:

A candidate for president of the United States formally launches his campaign by demonizing undocumented Mexican immigrants and demanding a 30-foot wall along the entire U.S.-Mexican border. He swells his following by attacking the free press as an enemy and hangs demeaning nicknames on all his rivals. He lies repeatedly about urban crime rates and urban voter fraud. He refuses all customary vetting of his taxes and financial holdings and conducts ugly rallies punctuated by violence.

He seals his triumph in the primaries by proposing to ban all Muslims from entering the United States. He urges his crowds to chant about imprisoning the Democratic candidate and promises to punish judges who oppose his illegal and unconstitutional mandates. He tells the Republican Convention that he alone can solve America’s problems. He praises dictators, especially Russia’s dictator, and denigrates democratic leaders. When charged by many women of sexual abuse, he claims that all are lying, even though he has boasted of sexually assaulting women.

In office, he governs as he campaigned. He uses the presidency to enrich his family, claiming he is above the law. He fills his cabinet with plutocrats and appoints a white nationalist as a top adviser. He bashes the news media. His rallies continue to feature crude repetitions, personal attacks on nonsupporters, and appeals to “the people” (meaning only the people who support him). Persistently he acknowledges as true or real only whatever serves his immediate interest. He fires the FBI director for investigating too vigorously Russia’s role in the 2016 election.<sup>1</sup>

And, I would add to Professor Dorien’s summation, He draws much of his support from Christians who acknowledge him to be a reprobate, but nevertheless, laud him as God’s anointed servant – a bit like Cyrus, King of Persia, who, in the Hebrew text is called “messiah.”

What are witnessing on this eve of the Glorious Fourth? Where are we headed as a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all [humans] are created equal?”

What does the fact that we have placed in the White House a man who lies with abandon, surrounds himself with sycophants, and demeans the highest office in the land with late-night tweets and crude *ad hominem* attacks tell us about ourselves and our own declining values?

Are we headed down the path toward fascism? Are we following in the footsteps of Nazi Germany?

Some say we are. I don’t think we’re there yet. But the danger is real, and no amount of “alternative facts” will change the reality.

Victor Klemperor, a scholar who chronicled Germany’s descent into fascist barbarism, maintains that with the rise of the Third Reich, we witnessed the death of the truth. I am not an historian, but I recall Jesus’ promise, **“You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”**<sup>2</sup>

When the truth dies, freedom dies with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Dorien, “Saving Democracy,” *Christian Century*, June 21, 2017

<sup>2</sup> John 8:32

And truth is a rare commodity in contemporary America. Timothy Snyder, the author of On Tyranny, believes that truth is dying in America in much the same way it died in Nazi Germany. Truth died in four modes with the rise of Hitler, according to Professor Kemperor.<sup>3</sup>

The first mode is ***open hostility to empirical reality***. This involves brandishing fabrications and lies as facts, and sticking with them, no matter how widely they are debunked. Examples include the president's insistence that millions of people voted fraudulently in the 2016 elections, and that human-caused climate change is a hoax. Over time, this hostility to empirical reality creates an alternative universe – a bubble of “alternative facts.”

The second mode in which truth died under the Nazis is through ***shamanistic incantation***, the constant repetition of crude smears and slogans. The leader repeats these over and over until, through sheer repetition, they acquire the aura of “truthiness.” Examples include such slurs as “Lyn’ Ted,” and “Crooked Hillary,” and slogans such as “Lock her up.”

This reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah's complaint that nobody in Jerusalem in his day was paying attention to what was happening around them. The residents of Jerusalem just kept chanting, *This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.* <sup>4</sup>Shamanistic incantation.

Number three is ***magical thinking***, a byproduct of exalting feelings over reason. This enables people to believe contradictory things and even to give credence to their own fabrications.

Number four is ***misplaced faith***, as in “I alone can solve it.”

I think, for us Christians, number four is most disturbing sign of the death of truth. You and I don't put our faith in any person apart from Jesus Christ. When we do, that person becomes an idol, and you and I become idol worshipers.

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<sup>3</sup> Dorien, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 7:4

Professor Snyder contends that we live in a time of “post-truth.” “Post-truth,” he contends, is “pre-fascism.” He thinks we’ve already arrived. Hostility to empirical reality, shamanistic incantation, magical thinking, misplaced faith – the signs are plain to see.

I’m not so sure we’re there, but, beloved in Christ, we’re getting close.

So, what are Christians to do? Shall we circle the wagons, retreat into our spiritual enclaves, do our best to look after ourselves and just keep praying that God will set us on a road that leads away from the precipice?

That’s what some Christian leaders are suggesting. Some are calling this the “Benedict Option,” after St. Benedict of Nursia, the six-century monk who was so horrified by the moral chaos following the fall of Rome that he retreated to the forest and established a monastic community. (It’s a shame that people are calling this proposed escape from responsibility the “Benedict Option.” It shows an unfortunate misunderstanding of Benedictine piety, but there you are.)

Whatever you call it, retreat from the public square is not the answer. As Edmund Burke observed back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

No, faithfulness lies in speaking the truth, in standing up for the values that once informed our national conversation. It lies in getting back to the basics, in reclaiming the core decency and respect for democratic institutions that we seem to have lost.

I wish you had known Mr. Burton. Mr. Burton taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade Civics at Pearl Watson Jr. High. From him I learned that we’re a nation of immigrants and should be proud of that fact, that America stands for freedom of religion and for the dignity of all people. Mr. Burton told us seventh graders that nobody is above the law – not even the president -- and that those who hold public office have a moral duty to look beyond partisan alliances to seek the common good.

He said there's a good reason why there are three branches of government – executive, legislative, and judicial – that each branch serves as a check and balance over against the others – *and this was going to be on the test.*

When he got into full swing, Mr. Burton would loosen his tie, stand on the chair behind his desk, and have us all stand and recite the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America.

Oh, Mr. Burton was a character. But, good Catholic that he was, he believed that, for all its faults – and there are many – this nation is a nation under God. Not a *Christian nation*, mind you, but a nation under God. He taught us that it is the sacred duty of citizens to support our institutions, to value public service, and to show respect for the law, even as we attempt to change it.

According to our *Book of Order*, one of the marks of the Reformed Tradition is “The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.”

To be a Reformed Christian is to acknowledge that all human institutions and all human beings are flawed. Yet, because Christ has redeemed the creation and is alive and at work for good in the world, we are called to work with Christ for good.

Together, we can help to draw our nation away from the precipice. Such is our patriotic duty and our sacred calling.