

“Blinded by Innocence”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Texts: Acts 6: 8-15 and Luke 10: 25-37

“Many Americans remember a time in their lives when every day in every public school, children recited the Pledge of Allegiance, which declared us ‘one nation, under God.’ But there are also people who remember saying the pledge without those words,” writes Dr. Lillian Daniel in her book *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don’t Belong To*. She continues, “It wasn’t until Flag Day of 1954 that President Dwight Eisenhower signed the bill to add the phrase ‘under God’ to the Pledge of Allegiance, at a time when the nation was increasingly fearful about nuclear annihilation and the Cold War.”

“Eisenhower also tapped into that fear when he said, ‘Man everywhere is appalled by the prospect of atomic war. In this somber setting, this law and its effects today have profound meaning. In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource, in peace or in war.’”

“Eisenhower, who was the first president to read his own inaugural prayer, was an outspoken proponent for an increasingly held view in America: religion—whatever religion—was a force for good, when compared with the Godlessness of Communism. Ironically, Eisenhower himself was not a member of a church when elected president in 1952, but he joined his wife’s Presbyterian Church weeks after taking office.”

Daniel goes on to describe the place of the church and religion in the 1950s and shortly thereafter, while also drawing attention to the fact that when we talk about the power of religion, it wasn’t all religions, but mainline Protestants like us. Many were historically under-represented due to their religion (like Judaism), their race (African-Americans and others), or their theology (like Evangelicals, Pentecostals and the like). “[At the top of America’s power structure was] mainline Protestantism, which in its ignorance presumed everyone was like them, or at least aspired to be.” Ignorance is one way to put it. Innocence is another. We thought then, and many religious people of every stripe still think so today, that we are innocent and those outside...well, not so much.

It is not new for religious people to think of themselves as innocent, or pure. In fact, Jesus spoke of it in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we read

this morning. You know the story well, but I don't know how aware you are of the reasons why the first two people passed the beaten-up man when they went by. The problem was that they would make themselves unclean by touching him, or assisting him. Ritual purity was strict in those days, and Jesus draws attention to the fact that sometimes there are more important things than purity, or innocence. Maintaining safe distance from those deemed unworthy or unclean is clearly rejected by this familiar story. We all admire the Samaritan for helping out the man, and we're right to do so. But we fail to notice the judgment of Jesus on the religious that came before. Some of that judgment, honestly, applies to us as well.

Brian McLaren picks up this same point in his book *Should I Stay Christian?* He says it rather bluntly, "If you see Christian identity as a pathway to innocence—as many if not most Christians currently see it, then in identifying as a Christian, you are seeking to be clean and separated from the unclean. Christianity for you is a temple, a sanctuary, a destination where good and innocent people isolate themselves from the dirty contagion of their unclean neighbors so they can enjoy the sweet fellowship of their own kind." Do we do that? Do we say things like, "You catch 'em, he'll clean em?" Are people dirty or "unclean" until we fix them in the church? Is the church, then, pure and without

sin? Do we think that statement ridiculous until we realize that our practices in the church often show what we would never say?

McLaren continues, “[Much of the Christian story] is a story of separation, superiority, and exclusion.” He then talks about many scriptures in which this issue is raised in our New Testament: Peter in Acts 10, Paul in Galatians 2, Acts 9 and 2 Corinthians 6. He even describes Jesus in Matthew and Mark and the story of the woman who begs healing from Jesus for her daughter. The text is clear that even Jesus seems to have struggled with this clean and unclean dichotomy. But he ends the section beautifully by saying, “sometimes a model of growth helps us more than a model of perfection. ‘Listen, this lesson is hard to learn. Jesus even struggled to come to it. But watch as he models how you can change your mind and see *the unclean* in a new way.”

In the end, McLaren calls not for superiority, innocence, or purity in the church, but instead calls for solidarity. “Through Jesus,” he says, “God joins in solidarity, not just with religious humanity, not just with enlightened humanity, not just with pure, innocent, idealized humanity, but with the fleshy, messy, mucky humanity of unclean slobs like us—who lost our innocence long ago.” He goes further, “This means solidarity with victims, yes, absolutely. But it also

means a painful solidarity with villains, for they are humans, too, and the line between victim and villain doesn't run neatly between humans but jaggedly within each of us. The path of incarnation and solidarity asks me to identify with humanity without discrimination, reflecting God's nondiscriminatory love."

That moves me to consider the words of Dr. Martin Luther King during this black history month. I know I've quoted people a lot today, but what he says in *Letter from the Birmingham City Jail* I think could be said today about much of the church. Consider what we might confront as predominantly white Christians in this place and in our time.

...Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist-- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful,

however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it...

...But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of the negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

...In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed...

...In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

...So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

King had a lot more to say, and you are welcome to borrow my copy of his letter (among other writings of Dr. King), but I think he raises issues that have not changed much. Maybe the particulars are different, but still today, we in the church need to face our preference for innocence and our fears that are myriad.

Continuing in King's words, "In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls... Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But oh! We have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists."

Blemished and scarred we are. Afraid we may be. What is ours to do for a time such as this? Would Dr. King write any different letter to the church today?

I wonder.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

