

“Reclaiming ‘Christianity’ for Jesus” by Paul Holmes



Trinity

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Good morning. Before getting into my sermon, I want to simply acknowledge Father's Day and Juneteenth. One year ago today, our nation created an official holiday to celebrate the freedom of those who were enslaved..

Those who preach from this podium often speak of being

intimidated. Here's one reason why. We've got lots of lawyers. Additionally, we've got the ordained, the professors, the sponsors and practitioners of 12-step programs. We've got biblical scholars. We've got the contemplatives and those firmly committed to daily disciplines of scripture reading, journaling, and prayer. For those standing at this podium, Seekers is a tough crowd.

As a life-long seeker (small S), my faith is simpler and less erudite. Nevertheless, I stand before you this morning, boldly proclaiming that one of the most urgent priorities facing God's so-called Christian church today is the need to reclaim "Christianity" for Jesus.

Having put that out there, let me back up a bit. Early last month, Sallie and I participated in a 9-day Civil Rights bus trip sponsored by the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights. The Freedom Experience immersed us in the sites, circumstances, tragedies, and triumphs, and helped us appreciate the leaders and foot-soldiers of the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins, the Selma/Montgomery voting rights march, the Montgomery bus boycott, the children's crusade in Birmingham, desegregation at Little Rock Central High School, the sanitation workers campaign in Memphis and other significant events of the Civil Rights movement. These events were life-defining for those who lived them and positively influential on our country's history and values.

Most tour participants were residents of Montgomery County. We came together as strangers and departed as friends committed to sharing our experiences and working to address civil rights issues in the environments in which we live, worship and work.

The Experience deepened and enriched our knowledge and

understanding in ways that books and movies never could. We walked the same streets, sang the same songs, touched the same podiums, and grieved on the same ground as civil rights heroes had walked, sang from, and shed blood upon decades before. Perhaps most memorable and compelling for us was connecting to and hearing the authentic, detailed, painful, and passionate stories of those who had lived the experience, those real people who are critical parts of our nation's history.

Our Freedom Experience was in the middle of the Bible Belt where churches are everywhere. Through the antebellum years and through the civil rights era, the Bible Belt was overwhelmingly Christian. As recently as 1990, more than 85% identified as Christian, and most considered themselves "religious" or "very religious." Jews were critically important to the civil rights movement, as lawyers, funders, activists and Freedom Riders, and as founders of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Yet very few Jews or people of other faiths lived in the Bible Belt. While today's population is in transition, it was and remains overwhelmingly Christian. So, nothing happened or happens, in the Bible Belt without deep so-called Christian engagement.

During our trip, one overarching message for me was the stark contrast between the roles of the white so-called Christian churches compared to those of Black churches. Recalling some of those traumatic images, on the one hand, we had white so-called Christians hurling epithets at Blacks sitting at Woolworth lunch counters. We had white so-called Christians thrashing marchers as they crossed the Edmund Pettis bridge. We had white so-called Christians training fire hose cannons on young children and releasing police dogs on them. We had white so-called Christians spitting on children just trying to go to school. We had white so-called Christians bombing churches, assassinating leaders, and perpetuating and celebrating thousands of lynchings. And of course, we had

white so-called Christians, sometimes hooded, repeatedly desecrating the cross – offering it not as a symbol of love, but burning it to terrorize and intimidate.

By contrast, and again generalizing a bit, Black churches preached messages of liberation for both soul and body. Black churches were the life-blood of the civil rights movement, largely because they were one of the few places where Blacks could meet, be in control and just be, without fear of white interference. Black churches were meeting places and strategy incubators. They were feeding sites, sanctuaries and first-aid stations. And they were sources of inspiration and mobilization. I was especially moved by the power of spirituals and freedom songs. Those songs helped build community, ease grieving and provide comfort and release. They reinforced courage and determination for the dangerous work ahead.

By extension, those churches also affirmed the faith of their Black members. The demonstrated strength of that faith is remarkable to me, particularly given the uncertainty and terror they faced. Somehow the clergy, laity, activists and nonbelievers all shared a clear sense that God was on their side. Martin Luther King and other leaders constantly spoke of the guiding hand of God, of the protective hand of God. Despite being the target of insults and tirades and almost daily death threats, King himself adamantly refused bodyguards, entrusting his safety to God, right to the end.

At numerous points during the Movement, King and other clergy reached out to the white church for financial, political and moral support. Most often such appeals were ignored or actively rebuffed for threatening the status quo. There were, of course, exceptions, those white southern clergy and laity who spoke out or marched in solidarity with the cause. Many lost congregants or jobs, were injured, or even died in the Movement. Some liberal northern ministers also sacrificed for the southern struggle, and experienced serious opposition from

their congregations.

White evangelical Christians throughout the south overwhelmingly opposed civil rights and upheld Jim Crow. Presented even in their best light, most white Christians in the north feared that things were moving too quickly, believed that civil rights were “not the business of the church,” or didn’t feel compelled to engage. In his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” MLK summarized the situation like this: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice...”

Of course, this Christian incongruity was not new or unique to America’s civil rights story. History is replete with examples of the so-called Christian church turning its back on Jesus in favor of greed, racial superiority, dominance, colonialism and empire. As reminders:

- In the name of Jesus, lots of crusaders slaughtered Jews as well as Muslims, and made fortunes from looting and ransom in the process.
- The slave trade – An overpowering and lingering impression from our visit to the historic slave forts in Ghana a few years ago is not just the traumatic and shameful power of looking through those “doors of no return” to the crashing seas beyond, but also of the clear and critical support that white European Christian churches provided to promote the kidnapping and shipment of 12 million Blacks to the new world. The Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, Spanish, French, and English all drew heavily on the authorities of the church, God and Jesus to dehumanize tribes and profit from that horrific and repugnant trade.
- The New World and our own country were founded on and structured around white Christian dominance. In

Massachusetts, my own Puritan ancestors proselytized native Americans – and also enslaved them. Our founding documents declared that “all men are created equal” and simultaneously institutionalized and protected inequalities of race, gender and wealth. Indigenous removal was thought to be divinely ordained and Manifest Destiny was supported by a commonly held conviction that God intended America to be under the control of white Christian Americans.

- Closer to our time and space, how many of us read Bible story books depicting Jesus only as Caucasian or sat in church pews next to stained glass windows of a light-skinned Jesus? We knew that Jesus was a person of color, yet most of us white folks comfortably accepted images affirming inequality.
- My father was a Methodist minister and an American flag stood off to his right in most of the churches he preached in. The message of Christian nationalism may have been subtle, even unconscious, but it was there, and I don't think he or anyone else ever thought much about it.
- Many years ago, our family visited a rural church in central New York where a visiting couple belted out the song whose title I will never forget. “I'm proud to be an American working for my lord in the good-ole US of A.”

One of the Black women on our trip explained that “the hardest part of the trip was confronting the horror of all that has gone on before and recognizing that this kind of hatred is still very much a part of our everyday experience.” Still today, it feels that many white, so-called Christian churches, instead of exalting Jesus' messages of love, justice and compassion, are rather worshiping idols. They are worshipping on the altars of wealth, power, privilege, dominance, violence, exploitation, fear, nationalism, exceptionalism, whiteness, and guns.

I have been really wrestling with these two conflicting and contradictory images of the cross. One image of the cross is the universal symbol of Christianity, of love and liberation. Its KKK-flaming counterpart is the anti-Christ, preaching an unmistakable message of racist hate, exclusion and oppression.

Here is why am I preaching about this today. I've shared with some of you that I've been experiencing a crisis of faith. The deeply disturbing, yet also comforting thing that I realized on our trip is that what I'm experiencing is not a declining faith in God's grace or in the wonder of God's creation. It is not a lessening of my love for Jesus and his teachings. What I'm experiencing is a growing distrust, even contempt of those people and institutions who loudly proclaim themselves Christian, but who bow down to the altar of white supremacy, nationalism, selfishness and hate. That is a godless theology. It's blasphemy and idolatry.

While God does not choose favorites, God does grieve for the poor and oppressed and I believe that Jesus came to earth significantly to offer hope to the downtrodden and oppressed. The New Testament is full of instances where Jesus defers to the downtrodden, poor and oppressed. There is perhaps a no better example than that of Legion in today's gospel. Earlier in Luke, we read about Jesus traveling from town to town and proclaiming the good news of the kin-dom of God. At that point in his ministry, Jesus was a hot commodity; he had a great following and many supplicants for his attention. But his attention and focus that day fell on Legion, a man who was "restrained with chains and shackles and kept under guard." As far as society was concerned, Legion was a man to be avoided, feared, stigmatized and controlled. Yet once again, Jesus welcomed the marginalized and centered them.

Our Galatians reading further affirms that point: "for in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no

longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

We Christians do a lot of things awfully wrong and also do a lot of things right. So, how does a follower of Jesus search for justice in America today? How can I, Paul Holmes, proudly call myself a Christian when many so-called Christians pursue positions and actions of such bitterness and cruelty? My personal answer is that we are compelled; we have an obligation to loudly call out white Christian people and churches to accountability and repentance. We cannot allow Christianity to be hijacked. True followers of Jesus must stand up and speak out regularly, from every church and from every pulpit. We need to reclaim “Christianity” for Jesus.

Yes, it’s a bit ironic that I’m preaching this sermon today, two weeks after Pentecost, which generally marks the beginning of the Christian church. But as this season’s reflection reminds us, “God is not a silent God.” And God does not want us to keep silent. In fact, the Pentecost season is the perfect time – the perfect time for a reboot, a rebirth, a cleansing fire.

So, it’s reasonable to ask who am I to speak up? Who are we to speak up? My response, believing as I do, is to ask another question. Who am I if I do not speak up? Who are we if we do not speak up? We cannot let our silence become complicity.

Helping to strengthen my spine this morning is the sense that I am not totally alone. Here at Seekers many of us have been working on various aspects of anti-racism and racial justice with our vigils, Freedom Fridays, Vote Forward, our domestic and international giving partners, and the hard work we do as individual Seekers. The Festival Center is just beginning an exciting new course called “Liberating Evangelicalism.” And there are numerous other Churches and servants of Jesus doing this work. I take some comfort in knowing that we can talk

about these very difficult topics. Still, while patting ourselves on the back, we can't be complacent or self-satisfied or believe that what we already are doing is enough. Because it's not and the stakes are very high.

Let me hold up three theologians, known to Seekers, who also share these concerns:

- Robert P. Jones, founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), and author of "White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity," posits that "we white Christians have not just been complacent or complicit; we have constructed and sustained a project of perpetuating white supremacy that has framed the entire American story." Jones developed what he calls a Racism Index showing that, compared to nonreligious whites, white Christians register higher scores on the Racism Index.
- Second, the Rev. Peter Storey was a white presiding bishop of the Methodist Church in South Africa and a force for authentic Jesus followers in the anti-apartheid struggle, and in post-independence reconciliation. He also is a critical Seekers' link to South Africa and a cherished influence in my life. At the end of his new book "Protest at Midnight," Rev. Storey takes the American Church to task. He states "In this dangerous and surreal time, I have listened for the witness of the American church, but the silence has been deafening... The silence I cannot understand is that of the 'mainline' churches – churches with theologies forged on the anvil of centuries of witness in all sorts of testing contexts. Why have these seasoned churches retreated so cravenly from the public square, leaving the field to religious apologists for the powerful?"
- Third, in a recent presentation at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Jim Wallis, formerly of Sojourners and now Professor of Faith and Justice at

Georgetown, stated straightforwardly “White Christianity has missed the biggest sin in American life and history” ... “For too many white Christians in America, the adjective ‘white’ is more important than the noun ‘Christian’.” And he continues “white Christian nationalism is a heresy and a sin. And we must name this for what it is.” It is a “test of the future of our faith”... “young people are watching and if we (the church) don’t come down on the right side of history here, a whole generation will not come back.”

I was raised in the church and I’ve always thought of the universal Christian church as a good thing, but the more we learn, the clearer it becomes that white Christianity’s problem is not just a question of a few bad apples. It’s now pretty clear that large parts of white Christian America will never commit to dismantling white supremacy and working for racial justice, so there are fundamental systemic issues that have to be addressed. We are not called to be conservative or liberal or Republican or Democrat. We are called to follow Jesus and, trite though it sounds, constantly ask ourselves “What would Jesus do?” We cannot allow ourselves to validate churches and so-called Christians that are working at cross-purposes to the teachings of Jesus.

The Christian church has been constantly challenged since Pentecost so many centuries ago, and it will endure. I’m convinced that the future strength and relevancy of the Christian church in America depends upon our ability as white Christians and white Christian churches to acknowledge and dismantle our centuries-long relationship with white supremacy and reclaim “Christianity” for Jesus.

Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, said that “Reconciliation with a difficult past cannot be achieved without truthfully confronting history and finding a way forward that is thoughtful and responsible.” The same is true of the Christian church. We white Christians

can either continue to impede justice or help lead the way. We can choose to work towards reconciliation and unity, but there can be no healing without this direct confrontation and accountability.

God gives us the strength and courage to live in solidarity with the oppressed, to be witnesses to Jesus' message of love and liberation and to call blasphemers to account.

White American Christianity needs a revival, a renewal, a reformation. We white Christians must stand in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and people of color. We must amplify their voices. We must be willing to confront hate and acknowledge Christian tyranny when and where we see it. What is at stake is nothing less than the credibility and relevancy of the Christian church, and the hopes and teachings of Jesus.

God is not a silent God. May God guide the work we've got to do...

AMEN.