

## The Other Shoe

Christian nationalism has been in the news a lot lately.

What is that, you ask?

Well, Christian nationalism says something like: "the American nation is defined by Christianity and ... the government should take active steps to keep it that way." Christianity Today, 2/3/21.

However, as it moves from the fringes of society to mainstream acceptance, there appears to be a more insidious aspect to this belief system:

"At first glance, the protesters who gathered around the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 seemed to be a motley crew.

One observer says: 'Preppy looking country club Republicans, well-dressed social conservatives, and white Evangelicals in Jesus caps ... standing shoulder to shoulder with QAnon cultists, Second Amendment ... commandos, and ... hardcore white nationalists.'

The symbolism on display also seemed like apples and oranges.

One group erected a giant cross.

Another a wooden gallows.

Someone in the crowd waved a 'Jesus Saves' banner.

While another sported a 'Camp Auschwitz' hoodie.

On closer inspection, however, the picture gets murkier, the lines harder to draw.

Christians waved Trump flags.

The neo-fascist militia group known as the 'Proud Boys' kneeled and prayed before plunging into the breach.

Nor were such mixtures of Christian, nationalist, and white supremacist symbols unusual.

One man, decked out as a ... crusader, clutched a large leather Bible to his chest — with skeleton gloves.

What looked like apples and oranges turned out to be a fruit cocktail called White Christian Nationalism." P. Gorski, ABC News, 1/18/22, modified.

What's this have to do with our readings today?

Only everything!

Because the reason Jesus almost gets tossed off a cliff today is because Jesus takes on religious nationalism, and squarely rejects it.

Because it's opposed to God's will.

Because God is in love with all people.

All cultures.

All creeds that seek harmony, peace and human dignity.

Naaman was a pagan general with a terrible skin disease.

The widow Elijah helped was an idol worshipping foreigner.

They got healed while the "right folks" didn't.

And that, Jesus says, puts a dagger in the heart of every form of "us against them."

Which is why the folks in the crowd go crazy!

Because the most deeply held human belief is:

"I'm okay, but you're a mess!"

That's the thinking that gives us tribes and nations.

Races and ethnicities.

Proud Boys and the KKK.

As the world shrinks into "us against them."

But Jesus says to this way of thinking: time's up!

God exists in every human person.

And if you claim to love God, then start with loving every human person.

Which is, let's face it, fine for some pious (but insincere) lip service.

"Oh yes, God lives in every person, uh, .... pass the salt please...."

But Jesus isn't about paying lip service to this central truth of our existence.

Jesus insists that we apply it to our daily lives.

Meaning, toes will be stepped on!

Precious beliefs of moral superiority based on skin color or religion or sexual orientation — go out the window!

Because if every human being is imprinted with the image of God, then every human being matters!

Deeply.

Profoundly.

No exceptions.

What Jesus does today is frighteningly drastic because he rejects “the way things are.”

Today, the other shoe drops, as Jesus begins his ministry by taking up the painful, radical consequences — of love.

Paul knows these consequences.

We hear it today in his letter to the folks at Corinth.

Today’s reading is one we’re used to hearing at weddings.

But Paul isn’t writing this ode to love for a couple of newlyweds.

He’s writing this letter to folks who are at each others throats!

And what he’s getting at is the politics of what a Christian community ought to look like.

Yes, politics are linked to our faith, but not in the way Christian Nationalists think.

It's not about preserving a white so-called "Christian" America.

No.

The politics of our faith flow into and out of the Kingdom of God.

God's royal banquet.

The magnificent cloud of witnesses who come from every land and language and creed and color!

The politics of God's kingdom never alienate or discard or despise.

Instead, the politics of God's kingdom are defined by nothing less than self-giving, self-sacrificing, love.

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere.

No matter what I say, believe, or do, I'm bankrupt without love." The Message TR., modified.

What Paul and Jesus insist upon, what we are called to live out — is that because each and every human being bears the image and likeness of God, each and every human being is to be cared for as if they are the most profoundly significant thing in this world.

Because they are.

But here's the thing.

I'm not there yet.

Perhaps some of you aren't either.

And yet what both Paul and Jesus are trying to drive home today is that while there is much harm in the failure to live up to our high calling when we deal with one another — the greater harm is not facing up to that failure.

Because facing up invites repentance.

And repentance offers a chance to change.

To try again.

We see this whenever rationalizations and justifications of our social systems blame the victim.

Or contend that the poor deserve their plight.

We see it when mercy and compassion are withheld — to avoid “enabling” the needy.

Jesus isn't having it.

“Jesus goes and does the one thing you're never supposed to do, even to strangers, let alone to friends and neighbors.

He tells the truth.

The truth about our pettiness.

And prejudice.

Our fears and insecurities.

Do you think Jesus' sermon about justice and compassion for the least, the lost and the left behind goes over any better today?

Jesus, whenever and wherever he speaks, still infuriates people."  
David Lose, paraphrased.

It's human nature to run away from self-examination.

It's human nature to thank God for not making me like that riffraff over there.

Except with Jesus, it doesn't work that way.

One fellow says the whole point of our Sunday service is to disarm a likely lynch mob by having us gaze on the One whom we have crucified. Will Wilimon.

That fellow doesn't have a high opinion of humanity, left to our own devices.

Of course, neither does the church.

Which is why, every Palm Sunday, the entire congregation yells out with one voice:

"Crucify him!"

The church recognizes that who we are, left to our own devices, is a scary thing.

That the worst advice you can ever give to anyone is: Be yourself!  
Id.

That mob mentality, the lynch mob that literally formed on January 6 – egged on by appeals to our fears, prejudices and need for a strongman to follow, paint an ugly, but accurate picture of human nature – left to its own devices.

So it's no surprise that Jesus has no illusions about us.

And his invitation to follow him is an invitation to us to drop the illusions we have about ourselves.

And in dropping those illusions, Jesus drops the other shoe of our faith.

Pious words and sentimental thoughts don't cut it in the kingdom of God.

That the purpose of our rituals and sacraments is to cause an inside out change in who we are, and in how we treat each other.

Or else they are worthless.

As the writer says, "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing."  
Dostoyevsky.

Love in action requires fearless self-examination.

Love in action requires a daily decision to let go.

To let God be God.

And lo and behold, when we take that deep dive, the gateway into God's outlandish kingdom suddenly opens – right before our eyes!

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