

**The threat of white Christian nationalism: a wake up call to people of faith:
weaving threads of faith, justice, and democracy**

Carter Heyward, c 2024

Hobart Lecture, Diocese of New York, Sept 12, 2024

If this were a sermon, our text would be the much beloved teaching from the prophet Micah, which though simple to our spiritual sensibilities is difficult for us to follow very evenly or well: “God has shown us what is good. And what does the Lord require of us? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8) I offer this bit of sacred poetry to set the stage for our gathering tonight.

I’ll begin the way I had planned to end this presentation, because I think what is most important tonight shouldn’t be left til last. I was asked to speak on how we can respond to the white Christian nationalism that threatens to undo both our nation and our churches, a serious problem that the Theology Committee of the Episcopal House of Bishops, meeting in June 2024, called “the gravest and most dangerous sin of today.” (*Responding to Christian Nationalism in the 21st Century*, June, 2024). If the bishops are correct about this, and they are, why have we liberal Christians, including our bishops, been so hesitant to address this grave sin and danger from the pulpits and other public arenas in our life together?

A primary reason church leaders have been reluctant to address this problem is that nearly all of us, except a few prophetic voices, have confused white Christian nationalism with traditional conservative Christian faith, whether Catholic or Protestant, and we don’t want to risk offending the more conservative and traditionalist members of our congregations and communities. Another reason is that too many of us have bought the lie that politics and spirituality can be, much less should be, kept separate. In truth, politics and spirituality, when and only when they are both generating justice-love, become the same public energy. Love. Justice-Love. Sacred spirit moving among us.

So let us be clear that white Christian nationalism should not be confused with conservative evangelical or traditionalist Christian faith. Conservative evangelicals love Jesus Christ. Traditionalist Catholics worship Christ. In fact, white Christian nationalism has nothing to do with either Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Christ. White Christian nationalism is a dangerous, violent, political weapon that has cunningly coopted Christian language and is being wielded by a movement of predominantly rich white men to secure control of the United States government in its executive, legislative, and judicial branches, both nationally and from state to state. In the spirit of this gravest and most dangerous sin, to quote the bishops, white Christian nationalism is perverting the presence and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth and his and our christic – Holy Spirited power -- to make justice-love -- and it is viciously attacking democracy, which is to say the foundational institutions of the United States government that has aspired to be a government of, by, and for the people.

This is the challenge I offer us: that we use our power, our voices, and all the talents and courage we can to empower our communities to speak out about white Christian nationalism, to vote against it, and to continue well into the future to work together against white Christian nationalism, bringing along as many of our more conservative Christian siblings as we can – now, today, and well into the future, beyond the upcoming election. I often say, when speaking about my book *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* (2022) that, were I to list an eighth sin, it would be the silence of America's Christian churches as we face the danger of white Christian nationalism. We need to be clear that this danger will not disappear, or even dissipate, regardless of the outcomes of the election this November. Its roots are too deep, its sins too systemic, in our midst. Faithful siblings of Jesus will be laboring far into the future to uproot these sins among us – in our churches, in this nation, and around the world. The sins that I name in my book (and others could certainly be named) are:

1. lusting after omnipotence (or power-over others) as a means of control
2. enjoying entitlement as a special privilege that belongs to American Christians and their special friends.
3. white supremacy
4. misogyny and its close kin: homophobia and transphobia,

5. capitalist spirituality: an unholy alliance of unregulated capitalist greed and an emphasis on the personal salvation of individuals,
6. domination of the earth, and
7. acceptance of violence as a means of problem-solving

Not long after the assault on the U.S. Capitol in 2021, I had a conversation with one of our local Baptist pastors in our small mountain town in North Carolina. No question that Ross and I were on different sides of most if not all of the so-called cultural issues that have yet again become divisive political wedges between folks who otherwise are friendly neighbors who try to help each other. But Ross and I had both been appalled by the presence of the large wooden cross prominently on display in the Jan 6 insurrection. Our disgust, however, was for significantly different reasons:

For me, the problem with the cross being wielded as a weapon on Jan 6 was two-fold: first, it was being used as a **weapon**, an instrument of violence; second, it represented symbolically an effort to **merge our allegiances to the United States of America with an utterly fake, hate-filled Christ**. The effort to signal the blending of a violent distortion of any religion – in this case, a despicable charade of Christianity -- with the United States government unmasked the core of white Christian Nationalism. That was the problem I had with the cross being placed at the center of the insurrection.

For Ross, the problem with the cross being wielded as a weapon on Jan 6 was that he believed Christians should not care who sits in the White House but rather should be focused on who sits on the throne. For Ross, the throne belongs to Jesus, not the President of the United States. Ross contends that, for Christians in America, their faith and their patriotism are two separate dimensions of their lives, and must be kept that way. I agreed with Ross that Christian faith and American patriotism should not be confused, though unlike Ross, many Christians with a passion for justice do care who sits in the White House – because our values and senses of justice and decency shape our politics.

At the time, early in 2021, Ross represented probably a majority of Christian evangelicals, Protestants as well as traditional Catholics, American Christians who were not looking to fuse their politics and religion. They did not aspire to be white Christian nationalists. In the past three and a half years, however, many Christians have gotten sucked into Christian nationalism by the fear being generated by MAGA forces: fear of immigrants, fear of gender fluidity, fear of “the other.”

Probably many of you, like me, represent a significant number of moderate to very liberal Christians, who also do not mean to be Christian nationalists, but have not known what to do – how not to be Christian nationalists, or how to root white Christian nationalism out of our life-together as Americans and as Christians. And yet, regardless of our intentions and whatever our spiritual paths, American Christians have all been to some extent shaped by the sins of white Christian nationalism. So indeed, while Christian nationalism is not synonymous with conservative evangelical or catholic Christianity, it has over decades managed to infuse both more conservative and more liberal Christianity with its violent, greedy, and deadly sins.

Let me quote Amanda Tyler, a lead organizer of the activist group “Christians Against Christian Nationalism,” “Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to fuse American and Christian identities. It suggests that “real” Americans are Christians, and that true Christians hold a particular set of political beliefs...”. Tyler continues, “Christian nationalism merely uses the veneer of Christianity to advance its own political agenda. It points not to Jesus of Nazareth but to the nation, as conceived of by a dangerous political ideology, as the object of allegiance.... When Christian symbols and language are used...to compel political unity under a particular leader, we have moved into the territory of Christian nationalism.” *Sojourners*, Sept-Oct 2024, p. 14.

As we know, as a political strategy, white Christian nationalists have been working overtime especially these last few years to confuse Christians on all sides of the political spectrum about who everybody is. Thanks to white Christian nationalism, from left, right, and center, we are

learning to see friends or foes in every pew and every pulpit when, in reality, most conservative and liberal Christians are just trying to do our best, as both Christians and Americans and we mean each other no harm. And yet we are all being used by those who want us to hate each other and, if need be, to take up arms against each other in order for a white Christian nationalist ideology to finally prevail. We are experiencing something akin to the dynamics of alienation that precipitated the Civil War.

This is reason enough for the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops to call CN “the gravest and most dangerous sin of today.” (*Responding to Christian Nationalism in the 21st Century*, June, 2024) The bishops are condemning the pernicious ideology and cultural framework which, according to sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.” *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (NY: Oxford, 2020), p. 10.

While white Christian nationalism poses a grave threat to our democracy, it ought also to raise serious questions to all of us – to all of our churches, whether we are more conservative or more liberal -- about ways in which white Christian nationalist assumptions weaken our own theological and ethical moorings. To the extent that white Christian nationalism distorts our Christian faith – whether more conservative or liberal -- we become less and less followers of Jesus and more and more disciples of those in power who despise him.

Now why do some of us add the prefix -- “white” – to “Christian Nationalism”? We do so because white supremacy is so utterly foundational to Christian Nationalism in America. The whiteness of most of its prime movers and shakers, the whiteness of its wealthiest benefactors, and the white racism of its proposals for our national life as set forth in *Project 2025* underscore the whiteness of Christian nationalism. So although a case can be made linguistically for “white” being redundant, I prefer to underscore that this political movement serves primarily white people. White men. White men who are using a fake Christianity as a tool to secure their own economic, sexual, and racial power.

So what can we do about the threat of white Christian nationalism?

Both our Christian faith – in Bishop Curry’s words, the Jesus movement -- and our American citizenship – at their roots and at their best – require us to love **justice**—righteousness, *tzedek*-- and to seek to make justice increasingly real among and for all people and between people and the earth. And both the Jesus movement and our American citizenship benefit greatly from **democracy**. That is, both our Christian values and practices -- especially we who have inherited protestant principles of participation as bedrocks of our faith -- and our American values and traditions, derive their legitimacy and take their shape from the people, as many of the people as possible. In a democracy, whether in church or state, “we the people” are empowered by each other -- and Christians believe, by God -- to give shape to our practices, customs, laws, institutions, and systems.

And so tonight we’re going to be weaving together threads of **faith, justice, and democracy** as means of responding to the threat of WCN.¹

Faith

This is **not** a presentation I would be making to a Board of Education, or to a group of law enforcement officers. I say this not because what we are doing wouldn’t be of interest to these groups (it might be) and not because it wouldn’t be relevant to these people and their work (I believe it would be). I say this because **we gather here tonight hspecifically as people of faith**. None of these other hypothetical groups come together for the purpose of figuring out what their faith compels them to do. But we have come together specifically to consider what is required of

¹ The Hobart Lecture was founded in 2000 and named after Bishop John Henry Hobart, the third bishop of New York (1816-1830) as an endowed series of annual addresses intended to acknowledge and encourage the pastoral ministry of the Church. And since white Christian Nationalism meets us today most dramatically as a political manifesto – many Christians are afraid to touch it publicly for fear of being seen as “political.” We are likely not to realize that, in fact, white Christian nationalism creates harmful pastoral problems which tear into our communities, parishes, and the daily lives of our people. And so, I am asking, can we Christians really and truly separate out the pastoral from the political dimensions of our lives in the real world? I think not – but I realize that we need to cultivate our abilities to address political matters from pastoral points of view and, conversely, to understand and address the political implications of the pastoral needs we meet daily.

us -- “to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8). This is why we are here.

Let’s think of “faith” as the ability to see with our hearts, or as the boldness to trust with the intuitions of our minds, or as the audacity to believe with our hearts, minds, and souls that which usually defies proof, reason, and argument. I honestly don’t know what I would do, whether I could cope, without faith. I was going to say it’s odd or funny, but it’s not really either odd or funny, that our faith – those of us who are more mainstream or liberal or feminist liberation Christians – provides a link to our siblings in more fundamentalist or traditionalist churches. Because most of these Christian siblings, with whom we are at odds on much that matters to us all, are also people of faith. Are they not?

Yes and no. We are all people of faith, but our faith is not theirs; and theirs is not ours, though there are important overlaps. We trust in significantly different experiences and understandings of God, Jesus, Spirit, and of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It does not require much of a leap to see that, in relation to our more fundamentalist and traditionalist Christian siblings, our understandings, and theirs, of who our neighbor is, and of what it means to love our neighbor – probably the most challenging moral question for all of us –often take us in different directions.

For all Christians, regardless of how conservative or liberal, traditionalist or radical, patriarchal or feminist, love of neighbor leads us, or should lead us, to care for the sick, hungry, homeless, destitute, and needy people and also other creatures in our common life. But most Christians, more liberal as well as conservative, are guided by faith to undertake service as pastoral ministry to individuals in need. Neighbor-love means literally feeding our hungry neighbors, visiting the sick, helping those in trouble, and this is always a vibrant dimension of Christian ministry. But for too many of us, Christian love stops there.

In 1980, shortly before he was assassinated at the altar in San Salvador’s Catholic Cathedral, Archbishop Oscar Romero preached publicly, “When I feed the hungry, people call me a saint; when I ask why people are hungry, they call me a communist.” That statement may have marked Romero for death by conservative political operatives in El Salvador and their allies among U.S.

powerbrokers. Because this is the subversive power unleashed when Christian leaders publicly ask provocative questions that move neighbor-love not out of -- but beyond -- the realm of pastoral care into the prophetic landscape in which we call for justice to roll down like waters. Archbishop Tutu implied something similar when, in the early 1980s, he asked with that characteristic twinkle in his eye, “I often wonder what Bible the supporters of apartheid are reading.”

So yes, both in our pastoral work and our prophetic efforts, we are people of faith, but neither the faith of our most caring pastors nor the faith of our boldest prophetic voices has much, if anything, in common with the determination of white Christian nationalists to shape the nation not in the image of the God whom Jesus loved -- but rather in the image of their lust own for power- over the U.S. presidency, the Congress, the Supreme Court, and all other American institutions that can be used to control who can marry whom, who can vote for whom, who can teach what to whose children, which books we can read, who can receive health care, who can be admitted to America, and so forth.

And yet, even though it is probably hard for many of us to stomach posters of Jesus in a MAGA hat and the flags that declare, Jesus is my Lord and Trump is my King, I imagine that the strongest and most faithful way we can regard these MAGA Christians, who – regardless of their intent -- are indeed ambassadors for white Christian nationalism, is as our siblings who seem to have gone missing from the Jesus movement’s commitment to love **everyone** – including undocumented Salvadoran and Honduran immigrants, gender fluid middle school kids seeking support, or advocates of kids hiding in classroom closets from disturbed, usually white, man-boys stalking them with long guns – such as in Winder GA only last week. And let me just say – the Haitians in Ohio, in our country, under attack by the MAGA strongmen this very day! Sisters and brothers, this is evil – white supremacy, contempt for immigrants, hostility for the poor, cat-calls for violence based on lies, lies, nothing but lies! No, we must say. No, period. We will not be quiet about this and other vicious attacks, all in the name of a fake god!

Once a conservative American herself, Jess Piper, a young Missouri mom, writes a blog about rural America. In it, she pleads with us not to write off rural Americans or conservative

Christians or any of those folks, including MAGA supporters, whose lives we really don't get if we think of them as ignorant, much less stupid. Of these people, Jess Piper writes, "We have to remember to give people grace and then give them knowledge. It's not that they don't care, they are likely just too busy trying to make it to look up." *substack blog*, Aug 28 2024

Loving our enemies means giving them grace, accepting them as our siblings, being clear with them about our values and inviting them to share theirs, whenever this sort of sharing makes sense – to them and us. Whether or not we like some of these people is beside the point. Loving them means respecting their humanity and doing our best not to disregard them. But it also means not letting them disregard or bully us or others. It means not stepping away from the struggles for racial, gender, economic, and environmental justice in order to pacify those who oppose us. We can try to be clear and emphatic -- and also empathic and kind. Our respect for them, our open-heartedness to them, doesn't signal any indifference to what they represent to us. We can admit that, in the movements for social justice, we are not willing to look the other way, now or ever. At the same time, our actions should signal that there will always be a place for them at our tables. That, I believe, is how people of faith can love our enemies.

Now my brother Robbie does not identify as a person of faith, Christian or other. In the context of WCN, he is grateful not to be involved with Christianity, and who can blame him? When asked, Robbie calls himself a "spiritual seeker" who doesn't want to be "boxed in" to any religion. When he and I talk, as we do frequently, I experience him as post-Christian and really as rather Buddhist in his non-theism. And yes Robbie says he does indeed believe in "something" beyond himself, some energy, some power, to which I imagine he turns in his dreams, wishes, hopes, and fears. But I know well that this "something" is a far cry from what he grew up understanding to be "God." After all, my brother, my sister Ann (a faithful Christian with a passion for justice!) and I grew up in the same household with the same parents and attended the same church. As a matter of fact, the Episcopal bishop of NC, who later turned me down for ordination as a deacon, approached my atheist brother Robbie when he was in his early 20s and asked him to consider the priesthood, which astonished us both. I experience Robbie much as I do many friends who do not identify with any faith tradition -- to be grounded in moral soil, as long-time champions of such basic values as justice, kindness, compassion, and mercy. In the

lives of Robbie and people like him, “morality” rather than “faith” functions as their north star. Over the years, this sense of what H Richard Niebuhr named a “moral imperative” has expanded my understanding of “faith” not only as an ability to see, intuit, and trust a Sacred Source with our hearts, minds, and souls but also, for many people, as finding and trusting a moral compass to point the way that often corresponds to wherever Jesus is leading us.

As for me, I identify as a “universalist Christian” who began long ago to believe that, really, the god of my childhood was a spirit immanent not only in human beings but in all beings and that to affirm that “God is with us” has always meant that the Spirit of justice-love is moving among us, between us, through us, within us, under our feet, over our head, constantly and forever – and that it’s always been this way, from the very beginning. It’s why I am drawn to the lyrics of the old Irish hymn “St Patrick’s Breastplate” in which we affirm “Christ within, among, behind, beneath, above, around” us. Long ago, I concluded that a radically present God-Spirit made itself – herself, himself, themselves – incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth in a way that caught on.

And here we are, those of us with faith in this Jesus and the God who caught on through him, believing passionately with Jesus in the power of love – I call it **christic** power – sacred power incarnate not only in Jesus and human goodness but also in the goodness and beauty of creation.

Our faith is our primary vehicle for the Spirit of God to move among us here and now, empowering us to love our neighbors, all of them, empowering us to see “through a glass dimly” that our enemies as well as our allies are our neighbors. Our faith requires us to do our parts, whoever we are, in envisioning the realm of Sophia/ Wisdom/ Jesus in which lamb and lion really do rest together. It’s almost impossible to imagine it, what Lincoln named “a more perfect union” between and among us all – friends and foes, oppressors and oppressed, people everywhere, and also between people and earth, and – many of us would say – between humanity, creatureliness, and the divinity that courses through us all.

But also by faith we are empowered to let those who dislike us, fear us, or want nothing to do with us go their way – and as Jesus advised, to shake the dust from our feet and move on. If I’d realized what good pastoral advice that is during the first half of my life, it would have been a bit

easier. I'd have been more relaxed in that I wouldn't have tried so hard to convince the hold-outs against women's ordination and marriage equality. We can leave some work for the next generations might well be a motto for folks in any community or movement, including the church!

Justice

To the charge that I'm a one issue person, I plead guilty. For me, it began early, because I happened to be Chair of our diocesan youth commission, and for the first time ever, the youth commission had a black member, a 16 year old Negro boy from Greensboro. I found myself in the position of having to either acquiesce to the fact that the church's youth camp, where the youth commission normally met, was legally segregated – or to say no this, which meant arguing with the bishop about the belief shared by all the teenagers on the youth commission that we should integrate the camp now, not further down the road. It was in that dispute, more than 60 years ago, that I found my voice and tapped my passion for justice – and it was not because I was an especially bold kid. It was because I had a responsibility – to chair the youth commission – and because the other kids on the youth commission asked me to speak on their behalf. Our collective passion for justice needed a voice and I was willing to give it a go, trembling all the way. But as Merrill Bittner, one of my sister priests in the Philadelphia ordination, so powerfully witnessed in *The Philadelphia Eleven* film, sometimes we have to speak even if our voices shake. When, as a 16 year old girl, I argued with the Bishop of North Carolina, my parents told me they were proud of me, and my dad's older sister Josephine said she'd never been so ashamed. So there. Different strokes for different folks.

This past July 28, in Philadelphia's Episcopal Cathedral, the 16 year old kid now grown into a 79 year old woman, had the honor of preaching again on my one issue, this time on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Philadelphia ordination. I closed my sermon with these words: "Almost all Episcopal seminarians have learned more about muting our anger at injustice than insisting, as church leaders, on putting social justice, along with pastoral care and common prayer, at the center of the church's reason for being. I pray that the legacy of the Philadelphia Ordination will be that, on July 29, 1974, the Gospel of Jesus was lifted up as being first and

foremost about ‘bringing good news to women, yes, and also to the poor, and freedom to prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free.’” (Luke 4:18).”

I truly believe that we are urged by the Sophia/Wisdom of God to make pastoral care, common prayer, and the struggle for social justice the core of our Christian identity. To let any of these three priorities fall by the way is to betray our Christian faith. Not that any one of us can do it all, or all at the same time, but that – as a living body, a community – we can work together, each of us doing whatever s/he/they can do best and supporting others in their work.

But over the course of my lifetime, since the end of WWII, it has been normative for predominantly white Christian churches in America to let social justice take a back seat to the other two priorities– worship and pastoral care – so much so that our justice work is often relegated to committees or handed over to agencies outside the church. We have bought into the politically conservative and morally shallow notion that the church shouldn’t be “political,” not realizing (or choosing not to realize) that everything is political – i.e, relates to how power is organized, and is used or abused, in our churches and our nation. Be clear that “political” doesn’t mean “partisan.” Politics is about power. Partisanship refers to parties.² A basic lesson in community organizing is that when the issue of power is not addressed, when we remain silent about how power is being abused, the abusive power stays in place. It does not change. And so when Christians refuse to “be political,” we are actively helping hold in place whatever abusive uses of power have been established.

Over the years, I’ve come to realize that this was why the standoff between the bishop and the youth commission was such a big deal. It was simply unthinkable to those in power, like the bishop and the standing committee, that a bunch of uppity well-meaning but ignorant kids would dare question the church’s priorities and, in so doing, put at risk its financial well-being which allows it to produce worship and pastoral care – and requires it to stay clear of politics.

² It may be that sometimes we do have to be partisan, at least implicitly. I am being partisan in this talk which, in most political races, I would try not to be. In most electoral situations, I/we can talk about issues and values and let our listeners hear what they hear in relation to specific parties and candidates. But Christian Nationalism has brought us to a point today at which we have to be partisan to protect our democracy.

A few years later, in college, I was introduced to Martin Buber via his famous *I and Thou*, in which he offers a social philosophy, psychospiritual framework, and intellectual reflections that became the basis of my understanding of “justice” as necessarily rooted and grounded in a power that is mutual – power as right-relation, righteousness, justice -- through which all parties are empowered to be more fully themselves, at their best. Not an “I scratch your back, you scratch mine” transaction but rather how can we help each other do whatever needs to be done in such a way that we all come out empowered in some way? Real, lasting, justice – or justice-love – is always rooted in mutuality. True love always generates justice (whether between individuals or between races, tribes, religions, genders, nations) and any lasting justice-love will be rooted in the ongoing struggle for right, mutual, relation. Simply put, our real-life experiences of love, justice, and mutuality are the same experience. Many Christians believe that these are experiences of God.

In his great second inaugural, shortly before he was assassinated by a Confederate zealot, Abraham Lincoln spoke of our “better angels” as if somehow everyone – Confederates and Unionists – had better angels and could draw upon them toward forming a more perfect union. To me, this might as well have been Jesus speaking to us all, then and now. Lincoln’s voice was and is the voice of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, urging us all – whatever side of anything we may be on in this fraught moment – to look for the good in one another and to show forth the justice-love that we ourselves yearn for, to receive and to give, as we strive to help make whole what has been splintered. To call forth our better angels is to pledge ourselves to the spiritual work, and moral responsibility, of generating mutuality whenever, and wherever, and with whomever we can.

Democracy

Living in a democracy, however flawed and partial it always is, we have a chance to do this together. Other forms of political organization – theocracies, autocracies, totalitarianism, dictatorships – are created to strip people of their collective rights, responsibilities, and power to work mutually toward making justice roll down like waters. In a democracy, no one of us sits at the top -- except as needed, temporarily. In a democracy, we share power and we pass it on when our time is up. George Washington exemplified this passing on of power at the beginning of our

democratic republic; and more recently, the President of the United States showed us how it can be done with grace and intelligence. Democracy at its best.

Our Christian faith has deep roots in Jesus' affirmation of all human beings as people of God. As a style or shape of government, democracy is built on the assumption that all people are deserving of basic human rights to food, shelter, clothing, health care, education, liberty, dignity, and justice – for all. That's what democracy is and that's what it aspires to become ever more fully. If you've been to protest marches in recent years, you've no doubt participated in the "call and response" -- "Tell me what democracy looks like." "This is what democracy looks like." And "what democracy looks like" is every imaginable color, shape, age, size, gender, sexual preference, religion, and folks with different levels of ability and special needs, all moving along together in one march.

Back in the early days of both the Christian church and this nation, the United States of America, the so-called "founders" of each seemed to believe that a particular form of community organization – democracy, for lack of a better term – had a lot to commend it. As a form of community organization, "democracy" originated in Athens during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, where it seems to have been set in motion by a powerful community leader named Cleisthenes, and his followers, who were determined to establish a government of, by, and for the people -- without a tyrant or authoritarian lord in control. Needless to say, much warfare and violence ensued for and against democracy in its earliest days because then, as now, there have always been powerful men determined to exercise control – financially, politically, legally, and spiritually -- over everyone else.

Though racist and sexist to the core of their patriarchal beings, the founders of our nation did indeed put much faith in a form of government that we understand now as a "representative democracy," in which all white propertied men could select representatives to lead their states and the nation. The founders believed that every white propertied male should be able to select their own representatives. Obviously, from our perspective today, our democratic origins were remarkably flawed and ridiculously partial. But it was a step away from the totalitarianism of kingship, and a step toward where we find ourselves right now.

The US government, much like the structures of the Anglican /Episcopal church, was born in this flawed, partial vision. So for more than two centuries, like their ecclesiastical counterparts (sometimes the same people) the leaders of the American nation have debated and struggled and voted and fought and been as nasty as angry hornets from time to time, trying to figure out how to be a functional democracy, a government actually representing “we, the people,” a nation trying to be that “more perfect union” which will always be built on compromise, in which everyone gives and takes something, seldom if ever everything they wish. Sometimes, like today, this representative democracy doesn’t work very well -- when representatives, senators, justices, governors, and even a former president, have become so frightened and self-absorbed.

In the years following the 2016 election, it became apparent to some in our small mountain community that the word “democracy” was becoming a dirty word to some of our neighbors. Strange sounds like, “freedom, not democracy!” and “democracy? never!” began to be heard around the edges of our common life. It took awhile for many of us to realize that, indeed, there were – and are – powers at work to make democracy seem like a weak alternative to the strong leadership of one man and one party. “We, the people” was, for some of our neighbors, becoming a tepid way of envisioning our roots and aspirations as a nation. Some had begun to slide toward an acceptance of one-party rule –provided that one party could be predominantly White and Christian and Nationalist -- in other words, “christo-fascist.” Which brings us to the current moment in which we find ourselves and our democracy in peril.³

³ The antithesis of democracy can take the shape of an authoritarian or totalitarian state on the left or right of the ideological spectrum – “left” and “right” denoting different understandings of how the economy ought to work. Leftist economies tend to favor the government’s distribution of economic resources; rightist economies tend to support private industry and enterprises. In the mid 20th century, an extreme form of authoritarianism on the ideological “right” was fascism, which Mussolini established in Italy, and which became known in Germany as National Socialism or “Nazism.” Franco instituted a form of fascism in Spain. Later in the century, the United States helped Chile overthrow the democratically elected leftist President Allende and propped up the fascist Pinochet instead. Terrified of the rise of Communism on the left, in Russia especially, but also in China, the United States had decided by the mid-20th century that we should align ourselves with those countries, parties, and people who were anti-Communist. In that spirit, we refused to support the fledgling government of Cuba when the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro overthrew the right wing government of Batista in 1959; and two decades later sided with those fighting the leftwing socialist Sandinistas in the late 1970s. The most important note we Christians should make here is that, from the 19th century on, especially in the aftermath of the Civil War, there has been significant political effort in the United States against any widespread distribution of resources. Such left-wing efforts have been deemed “communist” or “socialist” attempts to take wealth from those white men who have earned it to distribute among poorer, often black, people who have not. The party of Lincoln, the Republican Party, emerged in the 1860s as a champion of the “have-nots,” Black Americans whose economic well-being the government had a responsibility to take seriously. Ironically, a century and a half later, the political parties have flipped and

Preparing for this presentation, I came upon a stunning piece in *Sojourners* by a community organizer named Matthew Hildreth:

“About three in ten Americans sympathize with Christian Nationalism. In rural states such as ND, Mississippi, Alabama, and W Va the number climbs to nearly 5 in 10. Among my white evangelical Protestant community, 31% of us support the statement, “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.””... It can be scary to be the only person in your church or community who supports democratic values. But the fact is, you are not alone. Millions of pro-democratic voters live in small towns and rural communities. We’re just in hiding. That’s why leaders in our rural network are distributing thousands of yard signs that say, **“We support choice, freedom, and democracy.”** Our research shows that these signs are leading to multiple conversations with friends, families, and neighbors about the importance of supporting our democratic institutions... We must show our allies in the shadows that they are not alone. And if we’re going to address the Christian nationalist ascendancy in rural America, it’s easier if we all jump in together.” *Sojourners* Sept Oct 24, p. 24)

What jumped out at me when I read this piece is the yard signs – “We support choice, freedom, and democracy” and how effective they seem to have been in eliciting conversations among neighbors. The fact is, in a democracy, we rise together, and we fall together when we are divided and separate. The same is true, we Christians believe, of ourselves as people of faith – we rise together, in community, and we fall into sad pieces whenever we become isolated and alone. How interesting that people from different perspectives want to talk together about choice, freedom and democracy! Is this something we could do in our churches. Imagine that – actually talking about our values. Talking about our signs and posters. Listening to those whose signs say something we either don’t understand or agree with. But listening and speaking. Tell me what democracy looks like. This is what democracy looks like. Tell me what our churches

changed a number of times, but it boggles the imagination to think of the party of Lincoln fighting for those on the bottom or at the margins of economic security.

can do. This is what our churches can do. We can share our stories. We can study the Bible and other important spiritual, moral, and political resources together, like the early church and the liberation churches have always done. We can try our hands at creating contemporary scripture: poetry, prose, drama, art, and music that reflect words of God to us.

Weaving the threads together: responding to white Christian nationalism

In June 1973, several days before I was to be ordained a deacon in the Diocese of New York, I had an anxiety attack (which I was not prone to!) and decided I couldn't be ordained because I couldn't in conscience take the so-called "Oath of Conformity" that clergy must take and sign at our ordinations. In talking with my friends over at Union Seminary about this, one of them suggested that I call Bishop DeWitt, the Bishop of PA who was my colleague on the board of *The Witness* magazine, a man I respected so much. I didn't want to call Bp Moore, the ordaining bishop, because he was at home with his critically ill wife at the time. So I called Bishop DeWitt and told him my dilemma. To my amazement, he said he'd meet me the next morning in Penn Station for a cup of coffee and some conversation.

Once seated, I repeated to Bp DeWitt that I do NOT believe the Old and New Testaments are "The Word of God," that I believe God has many "Words" other than our Bible. And that I most certainly do not think for a minute that what the Bible says is necessary to salvation. Moreover, I said, I cannot promise to obey my bishop or to always be faithful to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church. I'll never forget the bishop tossing his head back, laughing with me, and saying, "Now, listen, Carter. Here's what I think." He went to say that the Bible is the Word of God is **not** to say that it's the only Word of God. To say it contains all things necessary to salvation does **not** mean that everything it contains is necessary to salvation. To say that you'll be faithful to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the church means that, over time, you won't be faithful to all of these important sources of authority because sometimes they are at odds with each other, so you'll have to make some choices. And to promise to obey your bishop should mean to every ordinand that you will only obey your bishop if you can do so in good conscience.

Bp DeWitt's words guide me to this day. I share this story with you because it is infused with wisdom and, together with courage, wisdom is a primary spiritual resource for us in the ongoing struggle against white Christian nationalism. Bob DeWitt was one of the boldest prophetic presences in my life and one of the wisest counselors. In his wisdom, he was calling me – and us -- to draw on common sense, conscience, and courage as primary resources in ministry. Still to this day, I pray for these spiritual gifts – common sense, conscience, courage – in trying to respond to the challenges of our time. I invite you, each and every one, to join me as we respond to white Christian nationalism.

As conscientious, courageous American citizens, we must make our faith public—even if our voices shake! not confusing our allegiances --one is to God, another is to our nation -- but not allowing our Christian witness to be muted.

As Christians and as Americans, we must put, and keep, justice-making at the center of our faith! Always central, alongside and mutually nurtured by common prayer and pastoral care.

Finally, as both Americans and Christians, let us be as democratic as we can be – making mutuality incarnate -- in working together and in voting always for justice, diversity, equity, inclusivity, kindness, compassion and mercy, and by praying for the health and wellbeing of our nation, our world, our earth, and our churches, morning by morning and day by day!

This, I believe, is how we will weaken white Christian nationalism and, over time, lay it to rest.