

Has Christianity Become Unclean? (Mark 1: 21-28)

Opening

One of the more memorable moments at the Presidential Inauguration was the poetry recitation of National Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman. I'm sure you saw her standing radiantly in her yellow coat and red headband. What a challenge at this time in our nation's history to write and present a captivating poem that reflects both the anguish and possibilities of our nation, which as Gorman said "*isn't broken but simply unfinished.*" To me, one of her poem's more impactful lines was

*"The hill we climb, if only we dare it:
Because being American is more than a pride we inherit--
It's the past we step into, and how we repair it."*

Gorman's poem conveys such wisdom, but repairwork is really hard. No wonder we would rather leave the past behind! But then how would we heal as a people? Healing calls for repairing the past from the inside, so that we can emerge as stronger, more durable, for a future we can not yet see.

#1

Well, let's admit it. Let's be honest and come out and confess, for many of us, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th was an epiphany. Our eyes were opened! Who knew there were so many extremist groups active across the U.S. -- There's the Oathkeepers, the Boogaloo Boys, Proud Boys, the 3%ers, and many others. The insurrection was an unveiling, an opening up, about the way some people throughout our nation think and feel about not only about our government, but about their religious views. Sure there were warning signs of stress in our body-politic before, but on Jan. 6th, the unrest burst through, openly erupting with a feverish assault. The vast cells of hate went throbbing through the halls, spewing out rage, and oozing violent intent.

The strange thing was that in the church calendar, Jan. 6th was the holy day we celebrate as The Epiphany, when Christians throughout the world tell the story of the Magi, who followed a new, bright star, heralding the manifestation of Jesus the Christ to the nations of the world.

But, on Jan. 6th, people throughout the world did see manifestations of Jesus at the Capital--his name was there on signs and flags the insurrectionists brought with them. You saw them. "Jesus Saves", "Say Yes to Jesus," and "Jesus is our Savior". Along with the gallows and noose, some insurrectionists brought large wooden crosses and marched around the grounds praying for the fall of our government, echoing the biblical story of Jericho's walls falling down. In the crowd a voice called out, "Shout if you love Jesus!" and the crowd cheered. Then another voice called, "Shout if you love Trump!" The crowd cheered even louder. Then when the doors of the Senate were breached, a group went down to the dias, bowed their heads, raised their hands and prayed "Jesus Christ we invoke your name. Amen."

Of course not all the various cell-groups were the same, but throughout the protest then rampage, we saw them connect the symbols of white supremacy, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and death threats, with Christianity and Jesus Christ in particular.

Would they really have arrested our legislative leaders for treason? Bound them up with zip-ties? Hung them? Gassed them? Blown them up? All in the name of Jesus?

On Wed., Jan 6th, we saw an epiphany of Christian zealotry claiming a Divine calling to punish and purify our nation through violence, desecration and death. The insurrectionists had hoped for a “Great Awakening” across the land, but instead many of us woke up and witnessed an abasement of our deepest Christian values and commitments.

#2

But let's stop for a moment.

Let's pause and look out at our world a bit more.

We don't have to look far. Our epiphany? It's not over.

It's all around us. We live right in the midst of it.

Several days after the Jan. 6th insurrection I was driving to Hamline University, taking the backroads as I usually do between my Longfellow neighborhood in Minneapolis and the Hamline-Midway in St. Paul. The light at University and Prior was changing from green to yellow to red. So I slowed down and pulled up behind another car that had stopped. Something caught my eye on the back of the car, a large decal in the shape of a Christian cross. But then there was another decal above the cross, one I couldn't read, as the letters were in a stylized jagged print. So I inched my car a bit closer, until I could make out the letters.

S--I--G. Enclosed in a circle.

I had no idea what the letters referred to, but I was curious. So I took a photo with my cell phone and then at work, with the help of google, I had a few moments of ongoing epiphany.

Now some of you may already know this. But for me it was a revelation!

I learned that S--I--G--comprises the logo for the German firearms manufacturer, *Sig Sauer*, the 4th largest gun-producer in the U.S., headquartered now in New Hampshire. The company has the motto “Never Settle”. Well, in good faith, maybe that means never settle for less than the highest quality, or less than the most effectiveness. But in our current context, where words do matter, these words and letters have the potential to be interpreted with a more defiant tone.

But the two decals placed together raised a lot of questions for me. Was it just a serendipitous connection? You know. The person before the current owner was a Christian, had a cross decal and then the next owner put their own personal SIG decal on. So maybe the two together are not trying to say anything. Just a happenstance. Or was it intentional--the two decals placed together suggesting something similar to what was seen on t-shirts worn at the Capital insurrection--“God, Guns and Guts Made America!”?

In one sense, the association of the Christian cross with weapons is not new in America. Christian conquistadors associated the cross with the sword! Puritans in Massachusetts massacred Pequot people claiming the Bible validated their actions. But what seems eye-opening these days is the organized, overtly threatening power of Christian nationalism backed by a narrative of redemptive violence that has infiltrated throughout our democratic society. With the banner “Jesus Saves” having become such an overt sign of insurrectionary power, we need to ask ourselves, “Has Christianity become unclean?” What would Jesus do?

#3

Well we can look back. That's what we're here to do. We can look into the scripture for this week. Let's look at our bible passage.

The new year 2021 kicks off with the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel has no story of the Magi, no angels and shepherds, no manger in Bethlehem, but 'shazam'--Mark dives in with the story of Jesus at the Jordan River, with John the Baptizer calling people out to be immersed, purifying them of their sins. Jesus too went from Nazareth to be washed, dedicating himself to the righteousness of God. See, in Mark's gospel, a Divine Reckoning is about to happen. What scripture calls "the reign of God" is so close. With Mark, Jesus' ministry begins here, in the reckoning and today's story rolls out the priority of God, first and foremost for healing. Over and over, in the gospel of Mark, we hear God's priority of restoring people to their full humanity as beloved members of God's people.

In this debut story, Jesus is with his first 4 disciples--Simon and Andrew, James and John, in the small seaside town of Capernaum. As was their practice, they went to the local synagogue on the evening of the sabbath. But this time, Jesus began discussing scripture with them from an impassioned sense of clarity about the reckoning reality of God. Then a man who the bible describes as having an "unclean spirit" confronts Jesus, strangely calling him the Holy One of God. But Jesus counter-challenges him, reclaiming him from what was harming him. Jesus cleared out from the man the deathly toxicity that forced him to keep at a distance, without a home or place to belong. Jesus' strength of holy presence brought healing to the man. When we look back to scripture, healing and restoration, this is God's call in the midst of reckoning.

#4

So in our time, in the world we live in, what do we make of this story today? What forms of reckoning are becoming epiphanies emerging in our time? How do we understand the priority of healing and restoration today?

As I reflect on our scripture story, I am compelled to say that Christianity--in the way we understand and practice it today--is in need of healing. There is so much within our tradition that has hurt others, hurt ourselves, keeping us from the deep work of love to which we are called.

As we saw in the insurrection:

There's the association of white racial identity and white cultural heritage with purity, moral superiority and entitlement.

There's the belief that God created a Manifest Destiny for humans privileging Christians to exercise power over others, and the earth.

There's the belief that Christianity is exclusive, that it's superior to other religious and spiritual traditions.

Then, there's the political view that our nation was founded as a Christian nation in contrast to a pluralistic democracy in which Christians share citizenship and civic engagement along with others.

These manifestations of Christianity are in need of healing--as well as the persons who have been harmed by Christians. Might be easy enough to just walk away, distance ourselves, or say, "Well

we're not those kind of Christians." But rather than walk away, rather than say the past is not our problem, we need the courage to engage a different path. This path calls us to step in to repair, not threaten others.

In the Sunday morning Adult Study group, we are reading the New York Times bestselling book, *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, professor of history at American University. Kendi knows first hand the priority of healing, as he has been surviving stage 4 metastatic colon cancer. Healing disease has become the lens through which Kendi now understands racism. He sees racism as a form of cancer that has spread to nearly every part of the body-politic, intersecting with bigotry of all kinds.

The challenge is to choose to be on a healing journey, not denying our illness, but nourishing our recovery and repairing the harms, inside and outside.

The good news is, God seeks to be on this journey with us. Whether it's our own individual inner work of grappling with how racism and other forms of bigotry have formed us, or our collective work of healing towards becoming an antiracist, antibigoted church, we can receive the grace to manifest the non-violent, inclusive Body of Christ.

Closing:

In the last few weeks, we have seen that our nation is at a new point of challenge and possibility. We have seen the harms of the past with searing illumination, as well as the disparities and suffering of our present. And we have seen where violent fear, rage, and grief can burst through with a vengeance. Perhaps in many different ways, most people are in need of healing. I know I am, are you? Thank God! As Amanda Gorman's poem claims, our nation is not yet finished, and as I would say, neither is Christianity.

Resource:

<https://www.ocregister.com/2021/01/20/read-the-full-text-of-the-inaugural-poem-by-amanda-gorman/>