

To the Reader: *This essay deals with changing trends and persistent problems, as well as opportunities, wherein the Church of Christ is called to be faithful. (It might be said that there is also a bit of Lenten type self-examination to be found in the composition.) Among many other things, the writing was certainly stimulated by the recent horrific events at our national Capitol. This essay thus seeks to make some faith-informed evaluations and outlines some elements of a Christian response. Like many others, I feel strongly that we simply cannot “say and do nothing.”*

THOUGHTS: JUDGMENT & FORGIVENESS

Ken Olson Lewistown, Montana

February 2021

An individual from Canada, Stanley Baldwin, has told of a winter when he was a college student and was trying to make ends meet. Among the cost-saving measures he took was that of not signing up for garbage collection. Instead, he buried the garbage in the back yard of the place he was renting. How did that work out? Not well. Came the Spring thaw, and the garbage was poking itself out of the ground, and he had a real mess. And what he had not known –was that the garbage collection in his town was free!

Now, that’s a zinger that applies to all of us in relation to God’s forgiveness of sins. It’s free, and it’s meant to be used, and if it’s not, we have problems. However, the part about it being free needs to be qualified to say that’s only looking at it from our side. Ultimately, there is no free lunch, as any biologist or ecologist or physicist will tell you. From God’s side, the cost of forgiveness was and is beyond measure. Central to our Faith is the Cross and the doctrine of the Atonement. So, God didn’t just throw a warm, fuzzy blanket over our sins and say, in the manner of some foggy, indulgent granddaddy, “O, it doesn’t really matter; forgeddabout it.” We are called to be conscious of the cost, conscious of one of the Lamentations, “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?”

Anything can be misused and even perverted, and many of us feel that way about much of the language surrounding repentance. “Repent!” The revival tents on the frontier, and later the huge stadiums of modern cities, were loud with such a demand. (By the way, Malcolm Muggeridge said that “If Jesus had been as popular as Billy Graham, we would never have even heard of him.”) In addition, there are those lists. For decades, all across this nation, we have seen a great deal of legalistic religion that obsesses over mental lists of sins and rules, of dos and don’ts, of mis-steps, yielded temptations, and other wrongs of both flesh and spirit. We have seen too many of those categories being used to separate, too readily and easily, the biblical sheep from the biblical goats. All this, perhaps, while suggesting that some of those sheep, not the Shepherd, are the ones qualified to construct the sharply divided pens. There is a dialog and a confluence of Law and Gospel in Scripture and in Christian theology. But the Law can be perverted, and has sometimes been reduced to itemized wrongs, harsh demands, judgments, and even threats of punishments for here or hereafter, or both.

Thus, any time the subject involves preaching about the Law, I can't help but recall words by Aldous Huxley that I first read several decades ago. He is justly famous for his novel, *Brave New World*, but I'm thinking of his first novel, *Chrome Yellow*, published long before, in 1922, wherein he describes the small English community of Chrome and its Pastor Bodiham: "It was nearly half past twelve. He had just come back from church, hoarse and weary with preaching. He preached with fury, with passion, an iron man beating with a flail upon the souls of his congregation. But the souls of the faithful at Chrome were made of India-rubber, solid rubber; the flail rebounded. They were used to Mr. Bodiham at Chrome. The flail thumped on India-rubber, and, as often as not, the rubber slept."

It's an approach that doesn't work, because it focuses mostly on sin and judgment knows all too little about forgiveness, grace, and the Gospel. Still, that didn't keep the fictional pastor from trying, nor does it for quite a few actual others.

However, it might be said that the pendulum has now taken quite a large swing the other way, and so, this essay has mostly to do with that trend. That is to say, recent decades have displayed an almost "equal and opposite reaction" against judgment, to the extent that the last thing of which many of us would want to be found guilty is anything that bears the slightest resemblance to being judgmental. Judgment is seen as a proverbial slippery slope to judgementalism. And, so, the reaction, in some quarters, is: "Who's to say what's right or wrong, anyway?!" The first emphasis or stream still exists in our culture, but this second one is another large tributary that is on the move, as well. It has strong disdain for what has been called puritanism, but we can --and, I think, should-- very much doubt that the answer to puritanism is impuritanism. That, too, is an overreaction.

To some degree, it infects and inflicts not just the wider culture, but also the church. Pastors, mostly gregarious types desirous of friendly relations, are not immune from paying too much attention to social weathervanes, one of which has been pointing to diminishing awareness of that disturbing element of human nature, sin (for lack of a more comfortable term). How much simpler is no-fault behaviorism, value-neutral coping techniques, or pop-psychology ideas that super-elevate one's own experience and, if truth be told, sometimes lean toward "if it feels good, do it."

So, thinking further regarding the trend towards being non-judgmental: As the old cliches do say, you can have too much of a proverbial good thing, push something too far (including the envelope), go to the other extreme, get carried away, go off the deep end, off the cliff, go over the edge, etc. etc. (Want more cliches? "I gotta million of 'em.") So, yes, I would suggest that we have "gone a bridge too far" when we are confronted with devious, hurtful, or loathsome behavior and we allude to the love of Christ or to God's mercy, --*while leaving unsaid any words about repentance*. We have arrived there when we suggest that, because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," that no one can even form a judgment concerning another's deeds without becoming judgmental.

Elizabeth Achtemeir taught homiletics (preaching) at Union Seminary in Virginia and at The Divinity School at Duke University in North Carolina. Based on a happening known to her, she

once described the following scenario: A businessman abandons his wife and family to move in with the woman who is his assistant. Over the phone, his very first words to his child are, "Do you forgive me?" He *expects* his actions to be accepted, all the while continuing in them. Achtemeir then says that the proper response on the phone would be, "No! Not unless you come home and put your adultery behind you." She's right, is she not? A Christian concept of forgiveness is linked to repentance, and that very word means, literally, "to turn around and go a different way." To recall the opening analogy: Forgiveness itself is a fundamental thing, but if the garbage of life is to be dealt with in any healthy and effective way, both for self and others, you have to sign up for it. And the qualifier of repentance is indelibly listed on the application.

Nearly twenty centuries before, the Scriptures anticipated some such scenario as that described by the homiletics professor and spoke to it. In our most devious moments, we might wish that Saint Paul had not written what he did in Romans 6, wherein he rhetorically asked the same contorted, pretzel-type question in tune with our own surrounding culture: "Can't we continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, "Can't we just keep on in our old, untransformed manner of life, just doing what we do, in order that God may just go on forgiving and forgiving?" It's in the mode of the German author Heinrich Heine, who wrote, "I like sinning; God likes forgiving. Really, the world is admirably arranged!" But the Apostle answered, "No! By no means! We were baptized –buried with Christ-- in order that we might walk in newness of life." Our present cultural milieu is too nearly lacking in even that basic understanding of forgiveness provided by the Christian Faith.

In addition to the homiletics professor, we get some help from Karl Menninger. For decades, he was known as the Dean of American Psychiatry, having founded the world-famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. He was also an active member of a Presbyterian congregation in that city. After a lifetime of thinking about the human condition and the related obstacles and assets to a full life, he wrote his book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* It was his eyewitness account of the near-disappearance of the idea of wrong, blame, and accountability. There are such things as guilt feelings, and many in his profession spend a good deal of time on them, but there is also such a thing as guilt itself. Menninger saw that recognition as an essentially hopeful and transformative thing. For the troubles of our world and of our individual lives, bad as they seem, did not come from nowhere, or from some extraplanetary Fate. Therefore, he says, "If something is wrong, as it is, look first at yourselves, collectively and individually. However bad it is, *we, you* are involved in it. That should give us hope, not despair." (He refers to that fact as "the bluebird on the dung heap.") He continues, "If we believe in sin –as I do— we believe in our personal responsibility for trying to correct it, and thereby saving ourselves and our world."

People of Dr. Menninger's profession spend their time repairing damaged spirits, after the fact. But he points out that it is pastors who have "a superb opportunity to do what few psychiatrists can, to *prevent* the development of chronic anxiety, depression and other mental ills." ... "The minister, standing before his flock week after week, speaking to them for a half hour [!] under aesthetic and hallowed auspices, has an unparalleled opportunity to lighten burdens, interrupt and redirect circular thinking,and inspire individual and social improvement." At the book's

conclusion, he urges, “Preach. Tell it like it is. Say it from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops. Cry repentance, cry hope. Because the recognition of our part in the world transgression is the only remaining hope.” His strong affirmation is that there is such a thing as sin. It is, and always has been, a part of humanity’s burden. Try as we might, it doesn’t work to diminish or ignore it.

In the words of Burnard Murchland, “Sin is a weary word ...but the problem of sin is the axial problem of human thought, and no effort of man’s mind has any lasting importance that is not concerned with that problem.” That is the truth. Socrates, in the 5th century B.C., ruminated on it, hoping that his assessment of ignorance as the fundamental problem was correct and that, therefore, knowledge must be the solution. But the question was always nagging at him: “How is it that people can *know* what is good and still do what is bad?” Saint Paul, too, wrestled with it in his Letter to the Romans, chapter 7, even putting on full display his own divided self; he said that he could both know and will the good, but that it was so often beyond his power to actually do it.

The dilemma has forever characterized human endeavors: stubborn, regardless of attempts to ignore it. Kathleen Norris, in her reflective 1993 memoir, *Dakota*, spoke against some of that minimizing in her own rural locale when she wrote, “If I’m OK and you’re OK, and our friends, nice people like them, are OK, then why is the world definitely not OK?”

Many of the so-called megachurches no longer obsess about sin, either. They no longer rail and flail against it: quite the opposite. In Robert Schuler’s crystal cathedral, beginning the trend in the 1980s, the talk was lite on sin and heavy on the Beatitudes --but defined as The Be-Happy Attitudes; so: quite lite, after all. Now, in overflowing auditoriums, the emphasis is on “success.” However, not on success as defined by God’s Word in Scripture, but as defined by the culture’s most thoughtless and self-indulgent standards. It’s as if the message of Dale Carnegie’s old *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Donald Trump’s favorite book not directly about himself) has been revised and updated to blatantly advertise: “Pray and grow rich, because God wants prosperity for you.” In Scripture, God is on the side of the poor and those who help them. Greed, one of the seven deadly sins, is seldom mentioned by televangelists such as Joel Osteen; that is taboo. But what is being elevated and peddled by them is just that: greed.

Christ said that it is more difficult for the rich to get to heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Now, *that’s* difficult! Concerning this passage, the English journalist G. K. Chesterton wrote, in his strong affirmation of the Faith, *Orthodoxy*, “I know that the most modern manufacturer has been really occupied in trying to produce an abnormally large needle. I know that the most recent biologists have been chiefly anxious to discover a very small camel.” [That would be a fossil!] This was Chesterton’s unique way of saying that the meaning of the text stands, in spite of all tinkering and denying.

Not battling greed, but, instead, promoting it: that is heresy. (Another antiquated word, but it fits.) Catering to it is selfish, hurtful, unbiblical, anti-Christian, unadulterated propaganda used to manipulate the gullible –and to fleece the flock of what little wealth they have. The “take” is used, of course, to buy the obscenities of multi-million-dollar-mansions and private jets. While not meeting a legal definition of fraud, it is floppy-Bible-waving deceit. It is slick, calculated

manipulation. (Whenever I hear Osteen's name, the words from the musical *My Fair Lady* come to mind: "Oozing charm from every pore, he oiled his way across the floor.") It is sin. And we must tell it like it is.

Tragically, for those who buy into such perversions, none of their purchases will do the trick, because none of that is real. In the words of the poet Shelley, "No one has the right to be respected for any other possessions but those of virtue and talents. Titles are tinsel, power a corrupter, glory a bubble, and excessive wealth a libel on its possessor." Self-indulgence is not self-fulfillment, and neither can it ever be. History has tracked that bite out of the apple for millennia and graphically reported the consequences in art and in literature, and the results never vary. If there's one thing we learn from history, it is that we learn not enough from it. How many times must it be demonstrated that "You can't take it with you" and that "There are no pockets in a shroud"? On both the largest and the smallest scales, history repeats itself.

So, again and again, when insufficient attention has been paid to that axial or central problem of humanity, i. e. the deep gone-wrongness in human nature, any supposed tranquility for individuals is an illusion. So, too, for nations. In Leo Tolstoy's epic novel, *War and Peace*, there is this account of Napoleon's army advancing into Russia:

As the enemy drew nearer to Moscow, the attitude taken by the inhabitants in regard to their position did not become more serious, but, on the contrary, more frivolous ...At the approach of danger, there are always two voices that speak with equal force in the heart of man: one very reasonably tells the man to consider the nature of the danger and the means of avoiding it; the other, even more reasonably, says that it is too painful and harassing to think of the danger ...and to think of something pleasant. In solitude, a man generally yields to the first voice; in society to the second. So it was now with the inhabitants of Moscow. It was a long time since there had been so much gaiety in Moscow as that year.

Consider the temperament in America in the early 1900s, the dawn of the 20th century. There is consensus from those who study such things that the mood was upbeat. Science was making all sorts of progress in bending the physical world to human expectation and, it was believed, there would be hardly any end to the advances. Education was expanding, and Utopian plans abounded. Optimism soared. But then came World War I. Stunned by the wreckage, the ill-based confidence collapsed. Questions arose about the Why and Wherefore, of goals and purposes, both national and individual. The attempt to find the upside involved the conclusion that The Great War must have been, surely, "the war to end all wars."

Time moves on, and nations, like individuals, sleep, and sleep again. After only two decades, World War II was about to shake the world awake again, this time with evil in its most terrible forms. H. G. Wells had published the second volume of his nearly one-thousand-page work, *The Outline of History*, in which he concluded that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Too few read that far. W. H. Auden's poem, *As I Walked Out One Evening*, written in 1938, was a warning about the all-too naive and superficial optimism that had taken root again. A portion of it pictures two lovers strolling along by a river, not a care in the world, vowing, "I'll love you, dear, I'll love you Till China and Africa meet, / And the river jumps over the mountain And the salmon sing in the street. /...But all the clocks

in the city Began to whirl and chime: / 'O let not time deceive you, You cannot conquer Time.'
/ In the burrows of the Nightmare, Where Justice naked is, / Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss. / ... The glacier knocks in the cupboard, The desert sighs in
the bed, / And the crack in the tea-cup opens A lane to the land of the dead. / ...It was late,
late in the evening, The lovers they were gone; / The clocks had ceased their chiming, And the
deep river ran on."

America, it is to be hoped, has now been jolted more nearly out of its latest slumber to assessing the renewed threat of the white supremacists and other fascist and authoritarian mentalities. Recent events have exposed the deep-seated hate and rage within those segments of society. An old saying is that wisdom is to know when to be afraid. There is, or should be, a justified fear, because it is occasioned by the worst impulses of human nature, threatening all that we hold most dear, as a country. We have seen the language of war used by the mobs and the glorification of violence: "Let's have trial by combat!" shouted Rudy Giuliani, the pseudo-Catholic, outside the Capitol. As Christians, we cherish faith, hope, and hold to the primacy of love. However, let's not be naive: Throughout history, the response of totalitarians and the makers of war has been, "You can join our cause, but, if you don't, we will crush you!" Napoleon even said that "God fights on the side of the most artillery." Power, with no tinge even slightly resembling love, is being elevated now.

The wake-up call is here. Now. Yet, before the alarm, there were abundant warnings. It was happening in plain sight. How could this country have dozed for the last several years when a demagogue was telling huge crowds that there is no such thing as Truth? "Maybe it's this, maybe it's that; you can never know." His message to the multitudes was, "The press is The Enemy of the People." (Stalin's phrase!) "So, don't trust even what you see and hear. Trust only me. Only I can fix it." In undeniably Hitleresque fashion, it was a numbing of his listeners' minds to not only Truth but also to morals, to principles of decency and love of neighbor. It's what so often has happened in cults of personality. Not a few seem to regard Trump as but a little less than a god, heaven-sent; "I am the chosen one," he said, looking up. Or, they imagine they are following along in the band of patriotic brothers from the *Braveheart* movie, thinking they have, in the lead, a hard-muscled ultra-patriotic hero on a prancing steed, one who is all about "Freedom!" But others see that they are tied to a money-hounding, publicity-obsessed sociopath in a golf cart –who cares nothing for them, because he can't, missing that "chip," as he is. We've all seen that vacuous, in-sucking black hole in his self where the heart should be.

Dr. Bandy X. Lee (M.D. and MDiv from Yale) is a criminal forensic psychiatrist and expert on violence. She recently said online: "Trump is transparent to me, because I have treated about 1,000 individuals just like him, and they were all locked away. What is unique about Donald Trump is that we as a society chose to put someone like him in charge of us." (Lee is the author of the newly published book, *Profile of a Nation: Trump's Mind, America's Soul*.)

How can anyone avoid the conclusion that both leader and many followers have significant things in common, involving a kind of emotional and mutual lock and key? And that for both, what is applauded is what is valued: the middle-finger-in-your-face attitude, the rude and

obtrusive arrogance. But that is not strength; on the contrary, it is a typical defensive buffer against internal insecurity and insufficiency. Eric Hoffer's 1951 study of mass movements, *The True Believer*, has become a classic, which is to say, more bluntly, regarding the phenomena, that he absolutely nails it. He observes that "Faith in a holy cause is, to a considerable extent, a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves. ... The less justified a person is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready he is to claim all excellence for his nation, his religion, his race, or his holy cause. ...Self-contempt sharpens our eyes for the imperfections of others. We usually strive to reveal in others the blemishes we hide in ourselves." (Trump almost constantly accuses others of what he himself does. It's called Projection.)

Combine such self-doubt with ignorance, and the result is a toxic and easily-ignited brew. Reflection, inquiry, deliberation, discussion, are, to some, threatening things. So, it is best for a follower not to think. Slogans, signs, and hats are better. The trend has been for ignorance to become willful, even, and for thoughtlessness to be seen as something of a virtue. Reflection, mindfulness, truth-seeking, are sacrificed to the leader who thinks for the group and tells them what to believe and do.

Some five hundred years after Copernicus, Twenty-five percent of the US adult population continues to think that the sun goes around the earth. Is that relevant to the theme at hand? I think so. A huge chunk of Trump supporters are so-called evangelicals. It sometimes seems that evangelicals are just the Republican Party at prayer. It's more complicated than that, but, according to the polls, not much. Most evangelical churches promote creationism, the anti-science world view that is committed to the idea that the universe is just 6,000 years old and was created in just six literal days, "because the Bible says so." Liberty University in Virginia is now the largest university in the entire United States: 127,000 students, and its enrollment is increasing every year. It is committed to that literalist position. Answers in Genesis, the main organization promoting creationism, has built a tax-supported "replica of Noah's Ark" in Kentucky. It is 510 feet long, 81 feet wide, and as tall as a 5-story building, "literally." The displays declare that the theory of evolution is the work of Satan. The newly-elected Governor of the State of Montana contributed nearly a quarter of a million dollars to the creationist museum on the Interstate at Glendive; it portrays dinosaurs and humans living together. This is because, before a supposed literalist Fall in Eden, *Tyrannosaurus rex* only ate grass! (Yes, that is what most creationists maintain.) Paul Braun, from Georgia, was in the United States House of Representatives from 2007-2015. He attended the University of Georgia and is a physician. Yet, he is on video giving a speech in which he says, "All this stuff I was taught about evolution, embryology, and the Big Bang: those are lies from the pit of hell!" In Congress, he served on – wait for it—The House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

Creationism exhibits all the hallmarks of a conspiracy theory, held for many reasons, but almost none of those relate to facts. It is all of one piece: if you can make people believe bizarre things about the natural world, you can manipulate them to accept all sorts of things in other realms, including the political. Voltaire said it best: "One who can convince you to think absurdities can convince you to commit atrocities." Such as those at the Capitol. So, yes, the sad reality is that ignorance is a huge factor involved in the crises in our land.

Waaay back in High School in Minnesota, our senior class play was *Huck Finn* by Mark Twain, and I happened to be given the title role. I can remember only one line, and that is Huck saying to his buddy, Tom Sawyer, in relation to one of their schemes: “Hey, ain’t we got all the fools in town on our side? And ain’t that a big enough majority in *any* town?” I used to laugh, thinking that was severe. Now, on some days, I’m not so sure.

Of course, not all the seventy million-plus votes in support of Trump were due to ignorance. Some were due to avarice. Before the November election, an affluent person wrote a letter to the local newspaper, saying simply, “I don’t approve of Trump, but I support him.” Trying to make sense of that, I suppose she wished that the rest of us would focus on Trump’s policies, not his behavior; those benefited *her*, and that’s what she cared about. But it’s not brain surgery, or rocket science (or rocket surgery): the translation is quite simple. For many, the vote was mainly about putting big purses and deep pockets ahead of humane principles.

--Because it’s not as though the “bad behavior” has simply to do with bad manners, from using the wrong fork to picking one’s nose in public. And it’s not merely about Trump’s rude and aggressive bombasts toward anyone who disagrees with him, or his issuing personal attacks on reporters who merely ask questions. It’s about much more. It’s as if one says, “For \$\$, we will overlook his racist slurs, his embrace of dictators, his 30,000 lies, and that Access Hollywood tape that reveals his contempt for women.” Really, is it worth *that*? Is it worth it, to pretend not having heard that psychologically revealing and deeply disturbing *boasting* that Trump did right into the camera, “I could *shoot* someone on 5th Avenue and not lose any votes!” There is no moral compass and never any remorse on the part of Trump, but is there also no limit, no “red line” in the sand of ethics and values, to which to which *we* are willing to hold him? None at all? How can supporters say, in effect, that it’s worth it to look the other way, when Trump calls our military dead “losers and suckers” and says that Obama’s Seal Team Six from the Pentagon “maybe did not kill Osama bin Laden,” that it could be a hoax; and that, during this deadly COVID19 pandemic that has taken half a million lives, that doctors –doctors-- routinely exaggerate or “lie up” the numbers of diagnoses of the virus, “just so they and the hospitals can make more money?” Is there nothing sacred for Trump? Has he no shame? All the evidence says No. The question is: To what extent is that also true of his followers? I fear the answer.

Plenty of Trump supporters seek cover, too, in that current trend of not wanting to appear legalistic, wherein forgiveness is perverted into an eternal smoothing over. Some may even relish being addressed as, “You old sinner, you,” trivializing everything. A non-judgmental God can be conjured up to suit multitudes of non-judgmental believers, i. e. those who don’t give a damn. (That was not the first world that came to mind.) It’s as if there were a sign out front that reads: “Free Forgiveness. No Repentance Necessary.” It could have been recycled from the 16th century days of indulgences. Those who idolize Trump (verb intended) might imagine that even his most outrageous, detrimental, destructive, and deranged attitudes and “behaviors” can thus be glossed over, tossed aside, and swept under the rug., etc. etc. because, well, maybe God doesn’t care that much about it, either. I have even heard the idea from Trump followers that, because “God loves sinners and is able to use them,” that *God* does not judge [!]; *ergo*, neither should we.

Try as I might to describe it, all this is so very stunningly warped as to be beyond words. A vaporous, sentimental, and unbiblical concept of forgiveness is thus employed, in the words of Martin Luther, “as a cloak to cover evil.” In his time, evildoers often did rely on that very idea to absolve themselves *and* to escape justice. They still do. They trust that millions are of the mindset, as expressed in just another variation by Heine, that “God will forgive me; that is his business.” And, by extension, that others should do likewise. The result is a bizarre kind of “*ethical herd immunity*,” with Trump, his followers, and his enablers (both in and out of Congress) all pushing to be exempt from being held accountable by anyone --God included-- and this even for the most grievous wrongs.

Time to say, once again: Yes, we, ourselves --all of us-- are flawed, more deeply than we will admit or even know. Nevertheless, God asks us (in fact, commands us), in the words of that same Auden poem, to “Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart.” We can still do that, crooked hearts and all. It is our calling. But, in addition, we can recognize serious wrong when we see it, and yes, *condemn it*. In spite of the fact that we ourselves “are no angels,” do wrong, ourselves, and are very imperfect vessels of faith-- we can and must resist and counter wrong in others, too, this for the sake of God and neighbor. That begins with logical as well as moral assessment; it begins with “forming a judgment” regarding what is true or false and good or evil. It takes seriously that there is such a thing as a moral compass and that God’s gift of conscience speaks within. That is very different from being “judgmental,” i.e., operating in some sort of damnation mode, merely to make oneself feel superior. On the contrary, making such evaluations is crucial to the moral health of individuals, families, churches, societies, and nations. And neither will love survive without it.

When the virus was first making its appearance in the US, I reached to my top shelf for a book that I had read more than fifty years ago, sat down, blew the dust off, and read it again. The author was the French existentialist, Albert Camus. His novel, *The Plague*, tells the story of a sunny city in Algeria, North Africa, some seventy years ago, and of what happened to it when the rats came out of the cellars and died in the streets. The disease they carried spread to the human population, causing the city to be quarantined, cut off from the outside world. The plague grew, intensified, and eventually dominated all activity, all thought. In this work of fiction, there are uncanny similarities to the events we have witnessed in the real world this past year. Camus describes denial, followed by more denial. He recounts the popular idea that the plague would, somehow, all by itself, quickly round the corner and disappear. When it did not, there was fear, anger, conflict, self-seeking, misplaced trust in false cures (peppermints, even), and despair and death. But there was also hope and some genuine heroism, too, as the main character, a doctor, along with a few others, did all they could to educate people in mitigation measures. Those included wearing a mask [!] to stem the deadly tide. Sound familiar?

Among the most difficult and destructive mentalities that the life-savers had to battle was the creeping cynicism that came to dominate: the sense, on the part of multitudes, that nothing could be done that would make any difference, so why try? In my re-reading of Camus’ work, I found that I had underlined only a single sentence in all 278 pages, and, to me, it still stands out

as a key to the entire narrative: “What’s natural is the microbe.” (Perhaps an entire anthropology, an assessment of human nature, could be written in response to that declaration.) Those few words encapsulate resignation, one of the things highlighted in the foregoing discussion in this essay: the idea that evaluation and judgment are somehow provincial or outworn and antiquated for people who are “just doin’ what comes naturally.” If not those, then it’s all just too much effort, so we look the other way. We are resigned.

When we are no longer offended by the offensive, when the abrasive no longer leaves a sore, and the rotten doesn’t stink, then we have capitulated to the mental microbe spreading in our society: to the inclination that sees the microbe as the normal and natural thing. When lies and conspiracy theories become as numerous as statements of truth, and can’t be told apart; when the merely legal is a subterfuge, not just for the illegitimate, but for the morally reprehensible, it’s time to get serious with that wake-up call, once again. And Christians should be the first ones to call the culture back to its saving senses. This, because we know that the good and the true and the beautiful are more real than the dollars and the positions of power for which they are so often sacrificed.

Pascal, recording his letters or *Pensees* in the 1600s, envisioned a crew traveling in a ship near land and having the confused sense that it is not they who are moving but, instead, the landscape and the people on the shore. He writes, “We must have a fixed point in order to judge. The harbor decides for those who are in a ship; but where shall we find a harbor in morality?” In that complex realm of human thought and interaction, what is the reference that is bigger and older, greater and more stable than one’s own moods or the transitory currents of public opinion polls? Christians find that harbor, that anchorage, in Scripture’s twin ideals of love and justice. At its best, the higher principles of America have pointed to the same. The lowest may be a natural condition, but the highest is not. The highest values require enduring commitment and work, and some, in every age, have given the literal --not just the proverbial-- blood, sweat, and tears, in order for those values to be preserved. The very least we can do is to show strong support.

The usual response to questions or criticisms of Trump defenders, i. e. those who have fallen prey to a personality cult, is to circle the wagons, making every conceivable excuse. Not unlike many of the German people in the 1930s who were falling under the shadow of the rising Third Reich, they must now be praying, not only for their daily bread, but also for their daily illusions. The Big Lie, that the election was rigged and stolen from him: yes, that is a big one, and many cling to it, yet. But, even among those who have to admit, finally, that it was not stolen, there is often the response, “Let’s not dwell on the past. Let’s just ‘forgive and forget’ and move on. It’s water under the bridge.” As for Trump himself, he has shown not even a hint of repentance.

That is because repentance assumes, as a prerequisite, that a person has at least a measure of compassion and concern that one’s own actions can be, or have been, hurtful to others: that’s normal. Trump is not normal. Trump has no such concern. In one of T. S. Eliot’s great works, *The Cocktail Party*, a character observes, “Half the harm in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don’t mean to do harm –but the harm does not interest them. ...Because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.”

No one on the national stage has been more self-absorbed than Donald Trump. As has been observed by psychiatrists and Third-Graders alike, he *only* cares about himself. The Christian Faith has long described the “curved-in-upon-oneself” syndrome as the essence of what is called Original Sin, i. e. not as in “first,” but as in “applying to all.” The Me-First symptom is writ large in Trump, perhaps exceeding that of almost anyone else, outside of an insane asylum. He likes superlatives: the biggest, the most, the greatest, the one who is First, and routinely makes perfect phone calls, even. He has attained many Ultimates, but none of them are good: the biggest unnecessary national death toll in a President’s four-year term; the one from whom empathy was most absent; purveyor of the most and the biggest lies; the one who was most divisive and who stoked the most hate in a four-year term. He is the first President to reject a peaceful transition of power and to incite an insurrection, and he will, without any doubt from presidential historians, go down as the worst President in the entire history of the United States of America. Trump likes winners. Those are trophies, but for losers, not winners. If this were medieval times, we might say that they are trophies from hell.

Trump has maintained, quite falsely, about many things, “Without X, Y, or Z, you’re not going to be able to have a country anymore.” Not so, and in every case. But without accountability for wrong, we most *definitely* cannot have a country –or a civil and benevolent society, or cities, or smaller communities, and not even families. In ways both little and large, words and deeds from ordinary citizens have always made a difference to help enact the highest of aspirations, whether those of our Faith or our nation. Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, in his drama, *Peer Gynt*, pictures discarded and forgotten “threadballs” on the ground that say to the title character, “We are your thoughts; you could have thought us! --We are your legs; you could have brought us!” Words and deeds. --May we add our own.

As some wit has said, there are some things you should do yourself, even if you do them badly, like blowing your own nose or writing your own love letters. Yes, those, but more, too. We all play a part in what is called, too rarely these days, the common good. It takes all of us.

In the insurrection at the Capitol, democracy may have dodged the proverbial bullet, but just barely. Now, we need unclouded vision to recognize the profoundly wrong when we see it, clear minds to judge it, and strength to resist it. See, say, and do. And –concerning that seemingly ordinary and often taken-for-granted thing-- we must vote out of office any of those who enabled that terror, for they have demonstrated, conclusively, that they cannot be trusted with power. Much will depend upon it.

Finally, as Christians, do we not have a moral imperative to condemn the absolute travesty of “cross-dangling?” The most blatant and prolific liars in politics ply their trade while wearing the sacred Christian image in order to sanctify their lies. It is displayed, no doubt, in an attempt to give both weight and cover to their deceit. The design, in one form or another, is prevalent among conspiracy promoters and extremist hate groups, alike. One thinks of the words of the 19th century author and artist, John Ruskin, that “A scoundrel’s religion is always the rottenest thing about him.” Happening for many years, this perversion of Christian symbols has now reached an abysmal bottom. It is absolutely jarring, how some of the terrorists at the Capitol

steps held banners with the name “Jesus” --the name that is welded to Jn 3:16: “For God so loved...”—this, while shouting in support of others clubbing those police officers who were standing in defense of that citadel of freedom. Incomprehensible it is, too, how so few in our country, afterwards, even made mention of the vile contradiction of doing unspeakably *un*Christian things, all the while the Cross of Christ was being waved overhead by the barbarians at the gate.

Surely, surely, it is right and proper for us to *condemn* –in the clearest and strongest terms-- *what* was done on January 6th and *all* who share responsibility for it. And to do so publicly, this by politicians with any shred of ethics, and also by ordinary citizens. And, surely, surely, also, by the members and leaders of Christ’s Church. Amen, which means, “Yes, let it be so.” Amen.

Kenneth H. Olson Lewistown, MT

February 2021

Rochelle F. Olson