

## Speaking Truth to Power

Ken Olson

Dear Reader: Ours is a participatory democracy, but some imply that clergy should “stay in their lane” and limit themselves to the shepherding of souls and to quoting Jesus’ words about love (i.e. maintain a deafening silence about what is transpiring in our country). I am a citizen, and it is simply in that role that I have written my previous columns. I have not accented my background. I do so today.

Clergy can speak from their profession (as can anyone else.) The Constitution is against the establishment of religion, not its relevance. What’s certain is that “Thoughts and prayers” do not suffice. To be clear: it is part of our vocation to critique hypocrisy, to encourage self-identified Christians to live out their values in society, to protest against the abuse of power that does not treat all people with God-given dignity, and to remind us all that there can be no justice –or anything else-- without Truth. In fact, not advocating for this is to deny one’s calling.

Trump publicly claims to be a Christian, saying, “Nobody loves the Bible more than I do.” Thus, when Rev. Gary Hall, former Dean of The Washington Cathedral, said that “Trump violates any possible norm of Christian faith and practice,” he was simply doing his job.

And so am I, when I say that Trump, with all his God-language, is much worse than a CINO, a Christian In Name Only. In fact, his outlook and behavior are completely antithetical, hostile, and damaging to The Faith, and his promoting the Far-Right imposter-religion of “Christian” nationalism is an attack upon orthodox Christianity and part of subverting our democracy. For clergy, all these arenas: virtue and vice, truth and lies, character and values, are absolutely “in our lane” and “right up our alley.”

Nobody is perfect. Duh. But those who defend Trump’s utterly indecent, hateful speech and immoral actions with the extreme absurdity that he’s not seeking sainthood should realize that, in the 1930s, similar claims were made in support of you-know-who.

Also, consider that a sizeable portion of the Bible includes the books of The Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and more. To address King David’s evil, Nathan pointed directly at him and said, “Thou art the man!” In the face of wrong, none of the prophets could look the other way, sleep at night, or stand idly by.

As for Christ himself: yes, the Gospels are indeed full of his words and works that reflect love. But, as Kierkegaard wrote, “love” is often corrupted into “a mixture of sex, sentimentality, and mutual backscratching.” So, what is it? That we are commanded to love our neighbor indicates that love, in the Christian sense, is not a warm feeling. (You cannot call forth emotions “on demand” any more than you can a sneeze.) Instead, love is a matter of the will. It is being “able and willing” to consider and to deliberately work for another’s well-being. That’s why psychiatrist Rollo May said that “The opposite of love is not hate but apathy.”

Jesus fully embraced the scriptural prophetic role of speaking truth to power (It’s one of the reasons he was crucified). He even overturned the well-established tables of the moneychangers

who had set up shop in the Temple, denouncing them as having turned the house of prayer into “a den of thieves and robbers.”

And Matthew’s entire chapter 23 is one long denouncement of scribes and Pharisees. He called them “hypocrites” and “whitewashed tombs:” nice on the outside but full of corruption within. –I can’t imagine a stronger condemnation. As theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, “When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he didn’t say, ‘There, there. Everything’s going to be alright’ He said, ‘You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil!’ And he said that to them because he loved them.”

Thus, Rev. Martin Luther King said, “I criticize my country because I love her. I want her to stand as a moral example to the world.” James Baldwin: “I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her.”

William Sloane Coffin was Chaplain to Yale University 1958-75 and, thereafter, pastor of Riverside Church in New York. He protested the Viet Nam War, marched against segregation and for civil rights. These words reflect his heart: “I am an American patriot who loves his country enough to address her flaws. All preachers worth their salt need fearlessly to insist that ‘God ‘n’ country’ is not one word. ...How do you love America? Don’t say ‘My country, right or wrong.’ That’s like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober;’ it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag, and don’t burn it, either. Wash it. Make it clean.”

Ken Olson lives in Lewistown, MT. He has a B.A. in Philosophy and a four-year M.Div. in Theology. He is the author of *Lens to the Natural World: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God*.