

Jesus was not and never will be a Christian Nationalist

White Christian Nationalism

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Jesus was not and never will be a Christian Nationalist. (For a variety of reasons.) If you take away nothing else from this conversation, please write that down, underline it and repeat it anytime the subject rears its insidious head-Jesus was not and never will be a Christian Nationalist. White Christian Nationalism is not Christianity. Christian Nationalism is not a religion, it is certainly not Christianity. Christian Nationalism is a political ideology committed to holding onto and acquiring political power in order to maintain conservative ideals and preserve the rule of what will soon be a white minority in the United States of America. Christian Nationalism bares little resemblance to the words, deeds, beliefs, principles, and spirituality of a young Jewish man, who lived in Galilee in the early part of the first century of the Common Era. A man, who I and many believe to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Chosen One known as Jesus of Nazareth.

My name is Bonnie Perry and I have the joy and responsibility of serving as the 11th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan. If you aren't an Episcopalian or a Christian you may have no idea what a bishop does, except perhaps move diagonally on a chessboard.

I spent 30 years as a parish priest and pastor serving and leading congregations in Northern New Jersey and the City of Chicago. Almost five years ago I was elected by the Episcopal clergy and lay people of 76 congregations in Southeast and South-Central Michigan to serve as their bishop. Which means I have oversight over some 150 clergy and more than 14,000 lay people from the Ohio Border up to Romeo and over to Lansing and down to Hillsdale. My homebase, the Cathedral Church of St. Paul is on Woodward Ave in Midtown Detroit. My spouse, the Rev. Dr. M. Susan Harlow and I and our two Australian Shepherds live in the Boston Edison Neighborhood of Detroit.

Last year when our anniversary came around, Susan and I were trying to figure out if we'd been together for 36 or 37 years. We did the math and eventually figured out we've been together for 36 years, it just feels like 37. We've been married for as long as this country has allowed us that right. Susan is a retired theology professor, ordained in the United Church of Christ, although she was raised in Virginia as a Southern Baptist.

I'm the oldest of four children raised in a devout Irish Catholic Family. My mom, now deceased was a pediatric nurse and a force of nature. My dad is a retired Lt. Colonel in the Marine Corps. I spent my childhood moving all over the country. In the midst of our many moves, the Catholic Church, the Marine Corps community and the local public library were always the places where we found connection and meaning.

I'm a patriot. My dad served in Vietnam. I stand at attention for the Marine Corps Hymn and know all of the words. I stand at attention for the National Anthem, though I understand why some would kneel and I do not find that offensive.

It was routine when on base, to pull over, get out of the car, and turn to face the flag, as taps was played and the colors were retired for the day. It's what we do, to honor all who serve, who have served and who will serve.

I left the Roman Catholic Church, as I was coming out as a lesbian. As a feminist I knew it would be hard for me, as an out lesbian, I truly did not see a future for myself as a leader in the Roman Catholic church. I joined the Episcopal church, because I knew women, straight and gay who were leading with joy and I wanted to do the same.

When I was 16, I went on a kids retreat. (I lost a bet. I'm a person of honor, I went on the stupid retreat. How bad could it be?) There are in our lives, before and after moments. President's weekend 1979 was one of those times. In the course of the retreat the priest assisting with the weekend visited my small group and inquired how it was going? I was an extrovert even then, and I offered that the retreat was fine, but I had not had any mountain top experiences. As a 16-year-old I thought perhaps I deserved one. Anyway, somehow or another I said to the priest that I was afraid of God. The priest asked me if I had ever told God that. To which I replied, "If God knows everything why would I have to tell God that..?" Then for the hey of it, there was a cross across the room and I said, quietly, I prayed looking across the room and said, "I am so afraid of you." Why not I was convinced if God knew everything I had ever done, or thought or in my case said, I was pretty convinced that God wouldn't like me. And so I offered that thought to the universe, "I am so afraid of you." And this thing happened that I know I didn't make up because I didn't know things like this could happen. I had a warmth at my feet that went up through my body all the way to my head and I couldn't stop crying and I couldn't stop laughing, and in that moment I knew that God loved me completely and utterly exactly as I was. It was then that it went from being my parent's religion to my faith.

Part of my faith is the belief that if God is God, then God can take care of Godself, and I don't need for people to believe something particular about God or God's son, Jesus. God can sort that.

What I care about is how you act and how you live your life. And I believe it is my responsibility to embody Jesus' great commandment, which is an addition to and reiteration of the *Shema*: "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might, and said Jesus, ' You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" Perhaps how I live my life may be attractive to you. Perhaps you will then be interested in learning more about the God I follow and God's son, Jesus Christ.

Each day I try to offer that profound and complete love that I experienced on that retreat more than 40 years ago. And ask anyone who knows me, each day, I fall short. But still I know that in spite of my flaws God in the person of Jesus loves me, completely and utterly.

(Pause)

What, you may be saying, does any of this have to do with White Christian Nationalism?

I came to hear about Christian Nationalism.

And to your question I will reply, "Nothing." This has absolutely nothing to do with White Christian Nationalism. Because what I'm talking about is faith and love and Jesus Christ. I'm talking about Christianity at its best. I'm talking about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Jew, and not an antisemite, I'm talking about Jesus of Nazareth who was a Palestinian and not an Islama-phobe, I'm talking about Jesus of Nazareth who was brown skinned man, not a white supremacist. I'm talking about Jesus who brought people in and didn't kick them out. I'm talking about Jesus who scripture tells us, went out 40 days in the desert and was tempted by Satan, and when Satan said, if you but believe in me I will give you power and dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, and Jesus replied, "NO. You shall Love the lord your God and serve only God." (Luke 4:8)

Whereas, White Christian Nationalism has said "yes," to having power over government structures, it has said "yes" to every dog whistle that perpetuates, white supremacy, it has said "yes," over and over again to power over people, to putting children in cages, and then sending their parents home to teach others a lesson, rather than welcoming the stranger, White Christian Nationalism has said "yes" to force, "yes" to authoritarianism, "yes" to mob rule, witness the overrunning of our Nation's Capital on January 6, 2021. So you are absolutely correct, when I talk about Jesus it has nothing whatsoever to do with White Christian Nationalism.

And if you think I'm angry then you are correct. I'm angry that a hate-filled political ideology has co-opted my religion and stolen our flag. A flag I revere. A flag that fluttered high in a spotlight when I was 8 years old and my father got us all up at two in the morning to go across the island to Hickham Air Force Base in Honolulu, HI to welcome home the very first POWs returning from Vietnam.

I'm talking about the flag that represents to me a country that was created in a stand against authoritarian rule. A flag that flies high, never falling as one party in power transitions to another, each having been duly and fairly elected.

Yet on the afternoon of January 6th, as I'd just finished a Zoom meeting with our diocesan Trustees, I started getting texts to get online and I googled CNN live. What I saw, what we all saw, was a mostly white mob, predominantly, but not exclusively male carrying crosses and flags and signs with faux blond Jesus' wearing MAGA hats rushing up the steps of our nation's capital. I saw Capital police officers trying to hold their ground, fighting with crowds who were swinging fire extinguishers, climbing the scaffolding and smashing windows and as I watched, I just lost it. I started screaming at my computer. Words I will not now repeat, words that didn't even begin to express my horror and contempt, for a group of people lead by an immoral man, who conservative people of a certain stripe have made a deal with, because for them winning by any means, is a political ploy they have wrapped and tied in theological verse and misappropriated sacred symbols. So yes, I'm angry.

I say to you as a flawed, yet faithful Christian who has spent some time studying the sacred scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, that the offshoot of Judaism that

broke off and eventually became Christianity was birthed on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, and in that moment scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit descended giving the remaining apostles of Jesus the gift of languages. Suddenly, largely uneducated people short on learning and long on love, could speak and understand multiple languages. The inaugural moment of the church was one based upon, diversity and inclusion of many, many very different people. Who could now hear, in their own language, the story of a peasant, who could have been a revolutionary, who could have gone a long way toward toppling the oppressive structures of Rome and instead, allowed himself to be killed by that same oppressive Roman government. Jesus chose not to use government structures to change the world.

The power of the Jesus movement is in love, welcome, hope, compassion and connection. And I am not naïve. I know of the VERY MANY ILLS carried out in the name of Christianity: the inquisition, the crusades, the pogroms and of course the holocaust perpetuated by some Christians and tolerated by others, to name a few of the insanely grievous sins done in the name of the Christian Faith. For these I make no excuse. And I simply say, the people who were my forebears in faith did wrong. And I am profoundly sorry.

They too, like White Christian Nationalists, have taken and misconstrued the mission and yearning of Jesus.

The difference between the sins of the past and the crisis of today is that I am alive now. And I am a leader in the Christian faith now, and I will not stand by and be silent as Christ's message of radical hospitality and profound love is pummeled by a false doctrine of domination and exclusion.

What then do we do in the face of White Christian Nationalism?

Three things:

We need to Learn

We need to Love

We need to Live.

People of goodwill, friends and neighbors, all of us gathered here today and all the ones we wish were here, we need to learn as much as we can about the insidious nature of this odious political ideology. The more we know, the more we educate ourselves, the more we will be able to call it out and name it for what it is. While all of us can engage in this, because Christianity is being perverted, I do hope that all of my Christian siblings will lead in this work. So that we will not hesitate to step out and challenge and question anyone who posits the notion that the tenets of Christianity are the reasons for people to demonized, excluded or belittled. It's on us. For my siblings who hold other faiths dear, or believe simply in the decency of humanity, know that I and all of us will do our very best to be with you and be your allies.

We Christians need to learn all we can about White Christian Nationalism and our own Christian faith so that we may proclaim Christ's love boldly with confidence. Jesus never was and never will be a Christian Nationalist.

We all need to love each other. We all need to be willing to show-up and to sacrifice for each other. We all need to be the neighbors for each other that we long to have.

We all need to learn, we all need to love, and we all need to live our lives to their fullest extent. We are made, each of us completely, uniquely in God's sacred image. We are stunning people. Look around and you will see what I mean. People with gifts and talents, and life experiences, people who have what this world needs at this time to make a difference. We are the ones who have been called to this time, to this challenge and we must not shy away, for without each other we are lesser, but with each other, all using all the gifts and talents that we have been given, we will prevail, our country will move beyond this scourge.

To riff on Abraham Lincoln: *Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*

Thank you dear friends, Let us move on together in hope and in love.