

Manifesto
Matthew 16:13-20

Timothy L. Carson
August 27, 2017

The year was 1690 and the Protestant William of Orange landed on the shores of an England that was presently led by James II, a Catholic. The surprise landing and great battles led to the re-establishment of Protestantism in England and Scotland, and King Willy was hailed as the savior of the faith. William and Mary sat on the throne until her death.

In Northern Ireland, a territory of England, Protestants held the majority and all of the power. Catholics were routinely discriminated against in every way. They often lived in great poverty, worked the worst jobs, and endured a legal system that favored Protestants in every way. In the midst of all this Protestants organized a fraternal organization called the Orangemen – in memory of King William of Orange. They were dedicated to the power of Protestants, the superiority of the Protestant religion and culture, and submission of the Catholics.

They admitted only Protestants into their order and membership did not extend to anyone married to a Catholic – considered a traitor. The Protestant churches largely endorsed the order of the Orangemen and many clergy also participated.

As an act of intimidation and show of force the Orangemen marched in formation, wearing the Orange colors, to the beating of drums, through Catholic neighborhoods and towns. During times of sectarian strife these demonstrations of the Orangemen often excited more conflict and violence. The traditional day on which the Orangemen march even today is July 12 (*The Twelfth*).

As time went on the oppressed Catholics engaged in more and more resistance against the Protestant majority. Eventually this turned to armed violence and revolution. That is what led to the “troubles” of Northern Ireland in the late 20th century. They continued until genuine political agreements and power sharing replaced the armed violence.

Even today the Orangemen continue to march. Though they generally do so under the banner of “protecting our heritage and history” they almost always inflame old wounds with their ideology of superiority, hate and conflict. Today few people of faith, Protestant or Catholic, tolerate them or believe they represent a way forward. They are either denounced or ignored, but not accepted.

Religious people of all stripes have been ashamed and chagrined by the behavior of supposedly Christian souls who engaged in hatred and violence. They know – now – that this has nothing to do with Jesus, his person or message, this one to whom we supposedly belong or subscribe. Non-partisan and reconciling churches work instead for peace and justice – avoiding the oppression that leads to violence and turning from violence as a solution. The way of Christ is a different way.

The last time I was in Northern Ireland a pastor gave me a photograph of a stained glass window in a church he served during the height of the troubles.

Look carefully and you will see that the design of the window is created from fragments of glass. These are the fragments created by a bomb blast which shattered the original window. The artist created another window from the shards and fragments. And then when a second bomb shattered that window, a second window was created from those shards and fragments. The point, of course, is that the work of the Spirit continues to create anew out of the fragments and that healing never ends until the bombs cease.

In the United States we don't have Orangemen or the same Protestant hegemony over Catholics that created the oppression and violence in Northern Ireland. But we have a parallel story.

Our story is also one of power, superiority and oppression. Our story includes slavery and the creation of an idea of superiority. Our story includes the time after slavery in which freed slaves continued to live a prejudiced life under Jim Crow laws, separate and unequal.

We don't have Orangemen, but our story includes secret orders of supremacists who lynched, tortured, intimidated and tried to turn back time to the bad old days of slavery and absolute white control. Our story includes the attempt to repress voting rights of minorities and intimidation to keep them from the polls. Our story includes mass incarceration of minorities and unequal sentencing. Our story includes the kind of prejudice that is in the air, in the water, in thoughts and actions, like it was in my extended family growing up. And that kind of hate easily extends to anyone who is different, not white, not Christian, not heterosexual. Any immigrant is suspect, even though unless we are native American Indians we are all immigrants.

No, we don't have Orangemen marching through the streets every July 12, but we do have people marching – carrying the torches of hatred, supremacy, and bigotry. They march under the false banner of heritage and history, but the real thing they carry is the fear that their bigotry will be left in the dustbin of history, which it will.

Sadly, and like Northern Ireland, our churches have been divided down the lines of this same bigotry. Before, during and after the Civil War - which was a war about slavery, not state's rights – pulpits across the land using the same Bible both endorsed and denounced slavery. To the shame of those who ended up on the wrong side of history, those who endorsed slavery were exposed as committing America's original sin: white supremacy, racism and slavery. After the war the same rhetoric was used to justify Jim Crow laws. And in every reconstruction and movement toward civil rights the same dark underbelly of hatred has reasserted itself, the latest attempt of our national sin to reemerge in a new form of discrimination.

Even today Christian leaders and churches stand beside and tolerate such evil in our land and in our midst. It is heresy, shameful, and repels whole generations of young people who have lost hope in any of our religious institutions. And they are right: They should swim away from churches that act this like rats swimming from a sinking ship.

Sadly, they often assume that all Christians believe these things. You talk to young adults today and they politely say that they will find their own way, thank you very much. And I don't blame them. Which is why Christians who know better need to start speaking up and saying what is and is not moral, what is and is not permissible. We need to say this publically, not just privately. For the sake of Christ we need to say this publically.

In the same way that Christians in Northern Ireland later repented of their sectarian sin, so we need to repent of our sins of racism and bigotry. And most importantly we need to begin stating very concretely what is and is not the way of Jesus, what is and is not being a disciple of Jesus. And that is the core of the story before us this morning.

This story from Matthew seems almost idyllic, a reprieve from the crush of the crowds and never-ending demand. Jesus and the disciples have stepped aside for rest and unhurried time together. Perhaps it takes this for the most powerful question to be posed and heard.

Jesus first asks about the word on the street: Who do folks say I am? The answers are complimentary, a great prophet, perhaps the ghost of John the Baptist, even Elijah, sign of the end.

But then Jesus asks for a personal review, who am I to *you*? The question, of course, is not just getting asked to the disciples then and there or to the one who answers. The question is being asked of us and as we hear it we are being asked to decide. But before we can answer Simon steps forward and declares that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. For that confession he is given a new name – *Petros*, rock man, and on this rock will sit my church.

The thing about making a confession in Christ is the kind of claim it makes on you. Because when you say *yes* to this you have to say *no* to so much else.

If you say yes to Christ then you have to say no to the Orangemen and what they represent. If you are an Orangeman and one day awaken to the claim of Christ on your life you know you will have to set

down your false claims to superiority and love your neighbor as Jesus insisted.

You know that if you say yes to Christ you will no longer be able to define another person as inferior to you. If you belong to the Klan or the Neo-Nazis or any other group that advances hatred one day in a moment of clarity you awaken to that evil and have to set it down. You have to set it down because it is absolutely incompatible with the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. They can't exist together. Or as the Gospel of John puts it the darkness can't endure the light.

I think of all the things I've had to set down over the years and it occurs to me that I didn't set them down because I wanted to or was inclined to, but because whatever I carried that was not Christ didn't co-exist well with Christ.

And this plays itself out in your personal life and your political convictions and the way you understand church and world. Whatever doesn't pass the smell test with Jesus has to go away.

This isn't always clear or easy but in time it becomes apparent. The more we cling to Christ and our true selves and more our little inferior selves wither away. And I believe this is the transformative work of the Spirit. When we confess with Peter that Jesus is the Christ we begin the process of saying yes and no.

It was like those Christians in the Confessing Church in Germany who resisted the Third Reich, Hitler and National Socialism. They saw that the way of Jesus was absolutely at odds with the racism, idolatry and militarism of the movement. They saw how churches – the Catholic Church and the State Lutheran Church – had been co-opted by the powers and principalities. They sold out for a variety of reasons – to avoid persecution, to stand close to the levers of power. But they sold out.

The Confessing Church, the underground church, rejected this violent nationalism and its claim to from God. And in the midst of all that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others penned the famous *Barmen Declaration*.

What was stated clearly and unambiguously in this manifesto, this credo, was “We have but one Lord ...” Do you know what the word for Lord is in German? *Fuhrer*. We have but one Fuhrer, one Lord.

Do you know what citizens of the Roman Empire were required to confess of Caesar? They were required to confess that Caesar was *Kyrios*, Lord. Do you know how Christians were confessing Christ at the same moment? They confessed that Jesus was *Kyrios*, Lord. We have but one *Kyrios*, Lord.

The confess Jesus as the Christ, to confess him as Lord, is to start a lifelong process of saying yes and no. Whether in march of the Orangemen, the torches of the Klan, or the Swastikas of the Nazis, saying yes to Christ is saying no to that which is not Christ, saying no without ambiguity, saying no as an act of faith, saying no as a tribute to the One to whom we say yes, the only one we call Lord.

Thanks be to God, Amen.