

Voices: The shame of racial injustice and the glory of confession

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September is autumn's threshold, and soon, American Christians will join the rest of the electorate to decide the fate of a nation.

Americans are a tired and anxious people, a young nation experiencing the adolescent pain that comes with the longing to find our true, noble identity. And so, we go to the polls in two months, a ragged, overworked people, an exhausted people.

And yet, still hopeful.

Americans as a whole appeal to the past to find our strength, to the venerable heroes we have worshipped since elementary school: Washington's myth, Jefferson's declaration, Paine's common sense and the echoes of both Roosevelts, whose words have, for more than 100 years, set our hearts on fire.

They dared us to do great things, to quell the storm and ride the thunder. Their timeless words dispel the fear that America flowered too quickly and now lacks the roots to sustain a mighty work grown up more than 250 years.

Medicine for racial illness

Specifically, American Christians struggling with our current political landscape look to the promise of Jeremiah 29:11—believing God has a plan for our nation—while foregoing the historical context of the chapter. The

words are not meant for the citizen, but for the disenfranchised exile, an exiled people looking for proof that their lives *mattered*.

More specifically, the white American church looks to the ancient letters of Paul, seeming to miss the point that it was Paul himself who used his Roman privilege to defy the Roman government. White American Christians read his words and identify themselves as the oppressed, while they themselves are the greatest benefactors of systematic oppression in the country.

Generally, the gospel message dares us to love greater. Do justice for the disenfranchised, a kind of justice often mistaken for grace.

We are less inclined to listen to the words of Frederick Douglass, John Brown, W.E.B. DuBois, Abraham Lincoln or the prophetic voices of Harlem's Renaissance—Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington.

The rhetoric and music of abolition and racial repair long have been a difficult medicine to the white American Church—which still is plagued by its secret love of colonial imperialism (see Manifest Destiny). The church, sick, refuses to take the medicine to its full measure, to cure the sickness of racism and bring the wellness of equality.

Without such a cure, there never will be a measurable peace in our United States. Black Americans know this best, because they suffer most from the symptoms of the country's unwellness, because they are the exile, the oppressed. They know the justice-starved nights and the protest's bloody afternoon.

White Americans absolutely despise being reminded of it.

A way past Southern myths

As a southerner, it is just as difficult to watch southern whites identify with a treasonous history of the slavers, who sought to destroy the nation all for the sake of human trafficking and the sinful labor it provided.

The Slaver's Revolt—or Civil War, to use a common misnomer—is our greatest shame, the slavery that brought it into reality our highest national sin. We use the rhetorical devices of Plato or the tools of revisionist history to try and excise our modern selves from that hideous legacy. But, there is no surgery for such a malady. This malignancy cannot be excised, only treated with humility, confession and restorative acts.

Appealing to the myths of white landowners who managed to forge an idea much greater than themselves is not a salve. Not even a full recitation of the powerful words of the U.S. Constitution can balm the pale, leprous hand that continues, to this day, to subject the Black community and other minorities to systematic racism.

But there is a way to wellness.

A path to solidarity is found in the purging act of tearing down the idols of a failed, elitist ideology and leaning into a sincere set of truths.

America is not a gift to the Christian.

America is a gift for everyone.

We are a nation built upon the highest precipice of hope, that a people can come together, and together, can endure one another for the sake of each other.

The country is the thing, the indelible thing, the whole thing. It is the gift we promise to every American child, and every child who one day will

become an American, a gift set apart from the national failures and sins we have held onto for generations.

Generations.

Forsaking one glory for another

Black Americans are not asking for everything. They are asking only for full-throated support from whites that Black lives matter, that their hopes and loves and enthusiasms *matter*.

And in response, white Americans save their shame, making for themselves an idol of an American God who brought forth an American Christ to empower a white American Church. In doing that, they savor upon their lips the brief succulence of power and abandon the taste of glory divine.

Christ's glory is found in deference of power, not its application; in community supplication, not supremacy.

There cannot be healing until a day of confession and absolution, until the white American church can go to its Black brothers and sisters and their children to say: "I was wrong. My fathers and mothers were wrong, as their mothers and fathers were wrong."

That confession is best for the American Christian's soul. And it is only that confession that can begin to heal a fracture as young as the Declaration of Independence and as old as the rock that slew Abel.

And that confession must be tied to the restorative act now, before November, when a vote cast for inclusion and reconciliation of the oppressed can start to mend racial fractures in the United States. So, let us take up the work that does not appeal to our American sins or their ghosts, but does the heavenly work of beginning to make all things new.

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