

PATRIOTISM IN CHURCH

Recently I overheard one person asking another why we don't sing the Canadian National Anthem in our church anymore. That seemingly innocent question got me ruminating. I immediately thought about our American neighbours to the south and how people on both sides of the political divide consider themselves the only "true" patriots.

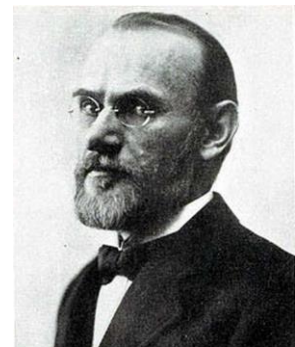


I thought back to the occupation of Ottawa two years ago when the protesters claimed to be patriots protecting their country's values. I remembered the 215 unmarked graves discovered in Kamloops in 2021 on the grounds of a former residential school bearing silent witness to our nation's

atrocities to the people of the First Nations. I thought about so many ways that people over the history of Canada have conflated their faith with patriotism.

I have always struggled with the idea that my Christian faith is congruent with patriotism. While I love Canada, while I love the values I have grown to cherish and which have formed me as a person, the deeper I dig into my faith the more I perceive the problem. Following the Way of Jesus means following a leader who remained humble, never got rich, eschewed military might, refrained from using force, consistently supported the vulnerable, and never exploited power for personal gain. Patriotism is a form of tribalism that separates nations into "us" and "them." Often those we consider our enemies are portrayed as unworthy of our love or even as sub-human animals.

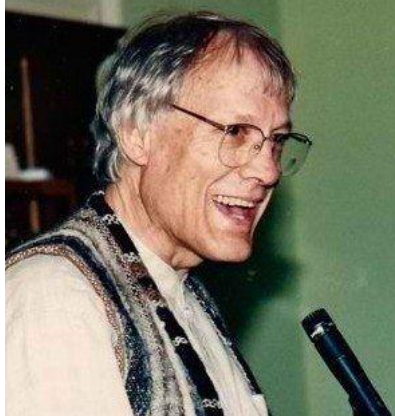
I remembered my grandfather who fought as a foot soldier in World War I, who's damaged lungs burred evidence of him being mustard gassed and who responded to nine-year-old me asking if war was worth it by saying, "War never solved anything. You have to find another way." Respected Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote this in 1914 just before World War I broke out: "It is simply out of the question that God 'helps' the Germans or the French or the English. God does not even 'help' the Swiss. God helps justice and love. God helps the kingdom of heaven, and that exists across all national boundaries. ...The foolish mixing of patriotism, war enthusiasm, and Christian faith could one day lead to the bitterest disappointment. We will not join in drinking this intoxicating potion. We want to look steadfastly and unwaveringly here to God, who loves everyone equally, who is



Karl G. Barth
1886-1968

above all the nations, from whom all have similarly departed, and from whose glory they have fallen short.”¹

With the current rise of Christian Nationalism in both the United States and in Canada, I perceive how people are listening to the wrong voices. Nationalism keeps telling us Christians to take up our swords and make nations “Christian” by any means



Walter Wink, 1935-2012

necessary – just as we tried to do to First Nations peoples. However, Jesus keeps calling us Christians to take up our crosses and be like him, serving the world through grace, humility, compassion, and self sacrificial love. Consider the first commandment that Moses brought to the Israelites in Exodus 20:3, “You shall have no other gods before me.” “No other gods” includes nationalism. Biblical scholar Walter Wink adds, “Once a religion attains sufficient power in a society that the state looks to it for support, that religion must also, of necessity, join in the repression of the state’s enemies.”² Therefore, Christian Nationalism does not follow the Way of Jesus.

It is quite the fragile god who needs political power to preserve and enforce divine will. Instead, it is quite the powerful God who partners with peasants, is born in poverty, washes feet, heals the sick, advocates for the oppressed, is unjustly killed and still changes the world.

In fact, if Jesus wanted a Christian nation, he would have established one, but he didn't. He established the church. Whenever we Christians forsake our call to be the church for a “Christian empire,” the results are always catastrophic. We are called to be the church, not an empire. As Rev. Dr. Thomas Long – who is the Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Emory University writes, “If I ever stand in a pulpit and insinuate that God’s political views and mine are perfectly aligned, I can be very sure that I have downsized the Deity and shattered the second commandment, the pesky one about not creating idols.”³



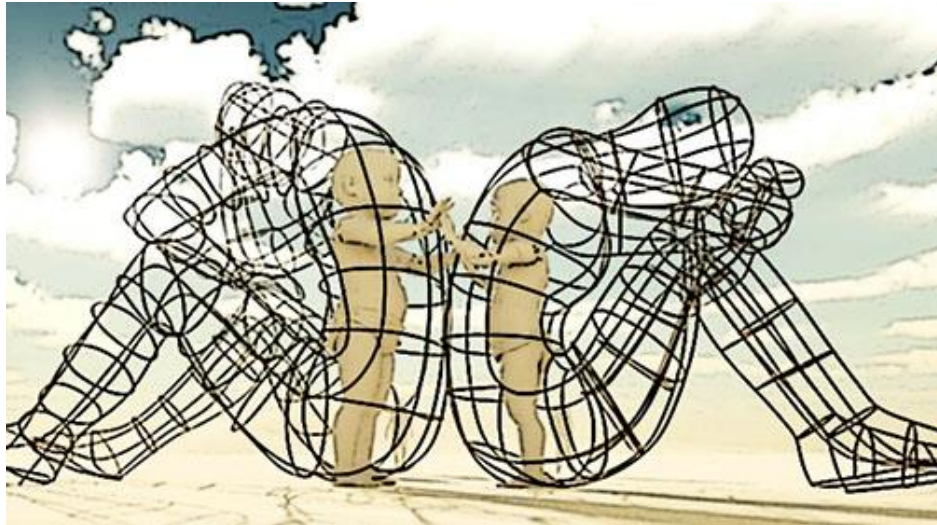
Thomas G. Long, born 1946

¹ Karl Barth was a favourite theologian of my seminary Systematic Theology Professor, Rev. Dr. David Demson. For more information about Karl Barth, see Wikipedia here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Barth

² Walter Wink, “The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millenium.” (Harper’s: New York, 1999), p. 264.

³ As published online on November 27th, 2023, here: <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/11/the-perilous-and-promising-pulpit/>

To use a biblical example, Matthew 25 tells us that when Jesus returns and judges between the righteous and the unrighteous, he doesn't judge them based on their orthodoxy, their patriotism or their individual definitions of morality. He judges them based on their compassion towards vulnerable people. Moreover, it should never be the task of the church to support our nation. Instead, the daily task of the church is to



make Christianity countercultural again. Once we untether Jesus from the interests of the empire or the nation, we begin to perceive how countercultural and radical Jesus' ideas actually are. Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it.

Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Broken souls? Forgive them. This radical Way of Jesus will always be opposed by the principalities and powers – our national project – but which we, as followers of Jesus, are called to embrace, announce and enact.

If the nation demands that we ride a warhorse, Jesus rode a donkey. If the nation requires that we take up arms, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove. If the nation enlists us to take up swords, Jesus took up the cross. If the nation roars like a mighty lion, God comes as a crucified, loving, humble and self-giving man. When the nation tries to arm us, God keeps trying to disarm us.

I can't imagine Jesus waving a Canadian flag or singing the Canadian National Anthem any more than I can imagine him wearing a "God bless Rome" t-shirt. Patriotism is too small. The Bible doesn't say, "For God so loved Canada..." it says,

"For God so loved the world." Making peace is our divine call as we learn to love the world in turn. Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. Instead, it is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice. It is the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer. It is the act of finding a third Way that is neither fight or flight, but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. This revolution of love – forged



through hard-won building of healthy and mutual relationships – is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.

It is not congruent with singing the Canadian National Anthem in church during worship.



And, yes, I know that the “revolution of love” about which I write seems like a pipe dream. I often despair, myself, at realizing this kind of dream. Then I remember that Jesus forbade his disciples from using force even against the servant of the High Priest when he was arrested, healing the servant’s ear instead.⁴ Instead of raising an army to defend him, Jesus accepted the cross and his death as the most powerful way in which to demonstrate how radical is the Way of Jesus which is unconditional love. While it is much harder to follow Jesus’ Way, it can truly transform the world and our selves.

That is the message about which I can gladly and joyfully sing.

⁴ Luke 22:50-51