

First Unitarian Church

July 31, 2016

How are you guys doing? It has been hard out there. There have been some high points this week, but overall it's been a tough time. A really tough time.

I'm worried for our country.

I'm worried for men and women of color, especially black people, living under the burden of racism. Experiencing racism daily, in ways that are often invisible to white people.

I'm worried for women, all women, as we hear threats in the public square to block access to contraception, and block women's ability to make the most private healthcare decisions for themselves.

I'm worried for trans people, who continue to be harassed and targeted with so called "bathroom bills" and with violence.

I'm worried for children, especially in New Mexico, where we are fiftieth in the nation for child hunger, and where poor families pay a higher percentage of their incomes in state and local taxes than wealthy families.

Poor people pay nearly 11% of their income in state and local taxes, while the wealthiest New Mexicans pay less than 6%.

"God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created." In this church we don't often take the bible literally, but we take it seriously. We receive the wisdom of our ancestors and here their question is crystal clear: Who would you allow to go hungry, if you knew they contained within them the very image of God?

I'm worried about what all of this means for all of us because what touches one affects us all.

I started with a reflection on the scriptures for our reading this morning because many people claiming the mantle of Christianity are the same ones pushing for policies that hurt people who are already hurting and diminish their ability to advocate for themselves.

As the **Rev. Dr. William Barber II** said in his speech at the Democratic National Convention on Thursday, they talk a lot about those things God says little, and little about those things God says a lot.

I had the good fortune to attend a day-long workshop with Reverend Barber here in Albuquerque a few weeks ago. Cathy was there too, (and David, and one of our Board Members, Martha Kettle, and a couple of other members of this congregation).

For those of you who weren't there, we are forming a couple of discussion groups around his book, *The Third Reconstruction*. You can sign up in the social hall after the service.

Dr. Barber pointed out what other bible scholars have also noticed, that the bible has more than 2000 verses regarding poverty, but only about five regarding homosexuality and none about abortion.

Many legislators in our country are sworn in with one hand on the bible, but a lot of the time you have to wonder if they've ever cracked that thing open.

How did this happen? How did Christianity in America get cut off from concern for the poor? How did it come to be associated with cutting programs to the poor and with a belief that power and success are signs of God's favor?

Kevin Kruse is a historian at Princeton. In a book published last year, he sheds some light on the answer to that question, and ... it may surprise you.¹²

In the years after the Great Depression, the American public held corporations responsible for the suffering they had been through.

Businesses had made huge gains in the roaring 20's, to the tune of 65% due to the mechanization of manufacturing, but the average employee's salary had increased only 8%. Soon, the top .1% of society made the same income as the bottom 42% and personal debt was growing out of control. (Sound familiar?).

It was unsustainable, and the market crashed. President Herbert Hoover assured people it would last only a couple of months, and tried to address it through a trickle down plan in which he did not extend aid to poor and hungry Americans, but met with CEOs instead to offer them support. It didn't work.

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected by a landslide to replace Hoover, Roosevelt ushered in the New Deal. He was a devout man who quoted the scriptures so often that his speeches were called sermons. His faith informed the New Deal, in which government programs were established to get people back to work and provide food to those who were going hungry.

Well, the big corporations did not take well to being blamed for the Depression, nor did they like these costly new government programs.

At the annual gathering of the National Association of Manufacturers in New York in 1940, they wondered what to do. After days of listening to bigwigs from General Motors, Sears, Robuck, General Electric, , they were surprised and delighted by one more speaker of whom most of them had never heard: James Fifield Jr, the pastor of

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/One-Nation-Under-God-Corporate/dp/0465049494>

² <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/corporate-america-invented-religious-right-conservative-roosevelt-princeton-117030>

a wealthy congregation in Los Angeles. Fifield had developed a theology that pleased the millionaires in his pews back at home, and now he shared it with the convention.

Dismissing passages about wealth and poverty, Fifield told the convention that worldly success was a sign of God's favor. The flipside of this theology, of course, is that if you are poor you must deserve it for some reason.³ Then Fifield told the crowd that if they wanted to change public opinion, they needed clergymen on their side.

A poll around that time had shown that while corporations were deeply distrusted, ministers were the most trusted people in society. The convention had found its way forward.

They funded a massive PR campaign, targeting ministers across the country with conferences and cash prizes to those who delivered the best sermons on this new message. Soon the wealthy association was devoting half its income to the cause. It worked.

More than ten thousand ministers got on board, preaching that welfare programs and government regulation were an assault on freedom. Their rallying cry was "freedom under God." They lifted quotes from the Declaration of Independence. That slogan caught on, and eventually sympathetic elected officials incorporated it into government.

Kruse writes:

In 1953, the first-ever National Prayer Breakfast was convened on the theme of "Government Under God." In 1954, the previously secular Pledge of Allegiance was amended to include the phrase "under God" for the first time, too. A similar slogan, "In God We Trust," spread just as quickly. Congress added it to stamps in 1954 and then to paper money in 1955; in 1956, the phrase became the nation's first official motto.

Since then, religious conservatives have pointed back to those practices as evidence that our government is fundamentally God-focused, and to argue against secularism as proof that we have lost our way as a country.

Religion had been used for selfish, greedy and even violent aims before. It was used to justify genocide against Native Americans. Slave owners quoted select passages from scripture to try to convince the slave that his or her lifetime of unspeakable suffering was pleasing to God.

But it is telling that slaves were prohibited from learning to read it for themselves. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglas tells the story of how he was shipped off as

³ From an article Kruse recently published based on his book:
<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/corporate-america-invented-religious-right-conservative-roosevelt-princeton-117030#ixzz4FpV2ddU4>

an adolescent to serve a young white couple. The wife took to him, initially, and started to teach him to read the New Testament. But they hadn't gotten very far when her husband caught on, and reprimanded her sternly right in front of young Frederick Douglas, saying if any slave reads the scriptures he will become unmanageable and miserable, and, basically, there will be no turning back.

Douglas says nothing could have convinced him better than the husband's diatribe that he must finish learning to read. For the man would not have been so upset by it if there weren't something in it that threatened his own power.

Today, religion is again being used for discrimination, and claims about freedom are again being made. Laws that give religious people or their businesses the power to discriminate against whoever they want are called RFRA's, short for the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Restrictions on voting are being pushed through under the banner of "states rights." But they aren't really about freedom.

Two RFRA laws were attempted in the New Mexico legislature last year. Both exempted hospital personnel from assisting with the termination of a pregnancy if it is against their beliefs, and neither one had any clause whatsoever for the life and health of the mother. It wouldn't have mattered if the procedure was a matter of life and death or whether another clinician was available or even whether there was another hospital in the area, which if you live in rural New Mexico is a big "if." This is freedom?

And this week a federal appeals court struck down North Carolina's voter ID law, stating that it was not only discriminatory, it was intended to be discriminatory. The court discovered that the North Carolina legislature had

"requested data on the use, by race, of a number of voting practices" — then, data in hand, "enacted legislation that restricted voting and registration in five different ways, all of which disproportionately affected African Americans."

The voter ID requirement was one of them. Voter ID laws have been enacted in 33 states.

It's like there's some kind of backlash happening...

Barber looks to history for some context around this moment.

He says we are in the adolescent stage of a Third Reconstruction, and the attacks are a sign of our strength. By "our," he means people of faith and their allies who are out to empower voters, dismantle racism, end poverty, house the homeless, strengthen public education, secure civil rights for all, and ensure that all people have access to healthcare and that includes reproductive healthcare.

What does he mean by Third Reconstruction? He's referring to those times in the past when a share of power was redistributed from the hands of privileged whites, especially men, and claimed by poor people and people of color.

The First Reconstruction occurred in the 1860s, after slavery was abolished. Black people and white people were elected and worked together in state legislatures. They rewrote constitutions. Laws were written guaranteeing free public education, raising taxes to compensate former slaves, and letting elections be decided by popular vote. There were even legislatures in the south, Barber says, that were majority black or majority black and white coalition. I'll bet many of us in this room didn't know that. I didn't.

But former slave owners resented this shift in power—this loss of power for them. They hated to see poor whites working alongside blacks for the common good.

In 1872, the KKK formed, and a so-called "redemption movement" began. It was actually *deconstruction*. It took apart what people had begun to build.

Voting rights were limited with a poll tax, a literary test, and grandfather clauses, which rather than grandfathering people in, actually grandfathered them out, by denying the vote to anyone whose grandfather had not been eligible.

Proponents of these laws said they weren't racist, because any black person who met the criteria—who could pay the poll tax, pass the literary test, and prove that their grandfather could have voted—would be eligible to vote.

Does this sound kind of familiar? Today, voting is limited by the days and hours polling places are open, the distance people have to travel, and voter ID laws. New rules, same kind of impact.

The mantra during deconstruction, Dr. Barber says, was "take America back again."

The second Reconstruction occurred during the Civil Rights Era, when social security was expanded to agrarian and domestic workers, voting rights were re-secured, schools were integrated, there was a war on poverty, and there were fusion coalitions of blacks, Latino/as, whites, and others, all pushing these things forward together.

This time the *deconstruction* that followed was called "The Southern Strategy." And it didn't look on its surface like it was about race, Barber says, because "Jim Crow went to law school and became James Crow, Esquire." It used code words like "entitlement reform," "states rights," and "big government." It focused on "cracking down on crime," through laws that actually had the effect of punishing people of color more harshly than whites, often with the result that if they got out of jail, they could no longer vote, go to school, or find a job due to their criminal record. The effect was—and still is—a lot like Jim Crow. The mantra of the southern strategy was "take back America."

Ronald Reagan made the southern strategy a national strategy.

We've forgotten the origin of these code words. States rights. Entitlement reform. Only recently has there been a national conversation about mass incarceration and racism.

But the election of the nation's first black president in 2008, the rise of Occupy Wallstreet and Black Lives Matter, the enthusiasm of people feeling the Bern for a socialist presidential candidate, and now the selection of the first female nominee for a major political party reveal that a Third Reconstruction is taking place.

Those who have hoarded more than their share of power and have abused it know that their days are numbered and the hour is late. They are fighting back. Their backlash, Barber says, is a sign of our strength.

Churches like ours, meaning people like you, have an important job right now. Not only keeping our eyes and ears open, not only learning what we can and doing what we can. We are people of faith. We are people who have faith in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, the ancient truth conveyed by our visionary if imperfect ancestors in the scriptures. We are the people who must reclaim moral language.

Our ancestors also grappled with this task. They faced people who claimed to be religious, but had hardened their hearts to others.

In the Gospel of Matthew it is written "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." ⁴

We've got this special legislative session coming up, and it is a situation that calls for a moral interpretation of what is happening. We're in an immoral cycle right now.

The cycle seems to go like this: tax cuts go to corporations, under the notion that they'll create jobs. Tax cuts lead to budget shortfalls, which leads to cuts in education, Medicaid, mental health resources, and other programs crucial to the health and well being of New Mexicans. That leads to higher crime, a less educated workforce, and worse quality of life. With those problems come fewer jobs and a slow economy. Which leads to more tax cuts for corporations.

This was all exacerbated by an over-reliance on revenue from oil and natural gas, which lost value last year. To balance the budget, New Mexico already chose to protect tax cuts and cut budgets for health care and education. What will we do in this special session? That may depend on who is paying attention, who is offered a platform to share their story, and who is standing behind them when they do.

⁴ Matthew 23:27-28

It is up to us to reclaim the moral story, and to remind our lawmakers and about the moral language of the New Mexico Constitution, which says, and I quote: “..all government of right originates with the people, is founded upon their will and is instituted solely for their good.”⁵

It says, “All persons are born equally free, and have certain natural, inherent and inalienable rights, among which are the rights of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and of seeking and obtaining safety and happiness.”⁶

At the workshop, Barber talked about the power of a fusion coalition, a diverse group of churches, organizations, and individuals, including those who would seem unlikely allies.

He spoke of the importance of creating a platform for people who are negatively impacted by current policies and proposed legislation to speak with their own voices, to tell their own stories. He said the usual leaders and advocates for these movements will often have to step aside.

There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm in the room, but what there wasn't much of is racial diversity. The group was largely white. At the end of the day, a woman who identifies as a queer Latina stood up and pointed that out, asking how we would address that problem. Heads nodded, and people applauded.

But later, when I was invited to a steering committee meeting to figure out how to go project forward from Barber's workshop, I noticed that I already knew the other people on the email list, and they are all white. When I arrived, I mentioned that I had texted the Latina leader who had spoken up, inviting her to join us. Well, I got reprimanded, sternly and at length. I was told that we do not have time for diversity. That bringing other voices to the table would derail the conversation. And that young leaders are especially problematic because they did not experience the civil rights movement.

I'm 39. I did not live through the civil rights movement. And I certainly could tell that I was derailing the conversation because the major decisions, including who was invited, had already been made.

I'm looking for a new group.

What happened at that workshop and meeting afterward were so revealing: there is a lot of relationship building to do in New Mexico.

⁵ Section 2: Popular Sovereignty

⁶ Section 4: Inherent Rights

And those of us who are white have to practice humility. We still have a lot of learning to do. But one thing I've noticed about white, socially progressive people is that we don't just care about others, we care about caring. Our identity is staked in it. And because our identity is staked in it, we resist hearing when we have been racist. It can be devastating to our sense of self. But that's an ego problem. We need to get our egos out of the way and open our hearts and intellects to growth and to new relationships.

To be really powerful and truly work for the good of the people of New Mexico, we need a coalition, and to authentically represent the interests of the people of this beautiful state, the coalition has to be diverse.

It has to understand and speak to the ways issues intersect, how when we say 30% of children in NM live in poverty, we also have to notice that the poor are disproportionately people of color, which means it is an expression of systemic racism.⁷ And we have to notice that a high number of poor families are women led households, and so gender inequality is also at play, and reproductive healthcare is essential to empower those women as the authors of their own lives. And poor kids are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to get sick, so there are educational and health intersections. We have to notice how it all fits together.

I ask the older generation, could it be that you are being called to step up one more time, and to stand behind and stand with the younger generation and people who haven't been heard? Could it be that what came before was all a part of a path that led to this moment, now? That you were born for such a time as this?

And younger folks, could it be that we are the ones we've been looking for? That we are the leaders and the allies and the moral advocates who will take back moral language and who will reveal the whitewashed tombs and call out what is full of death and what is the path to life and living and justice?

William Barber is coming back to New Mexico on Monday, October 17th, and he's bringing Sister Simone Campbell and the Revs. Tracy Blackman and James Forbes. Heavy hitters, all. Inspiring speakers. What will it look like? Who will attend? Will you go, and if so, who will you invite? I'm going, and I'm going to invite friends, some I already know, and some I haven't met yet but I plan to on my way to discovering the new group I'm looking for.

In his beautiful book, *Between the World and Me*, the African American journalist and educator Ta Nehisi Coates is honest with his son about the harsh realities of the America into which he has been born. He does not offer him false comfort, but quote his grandmother, saying, "You have to find a way to live in *the all* of it."

⁷ http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/new-study-finds-new-mexico-has-the-highest-rate-of/article_a81c6cd6-bc2b-55f5-a96a-7a90742d2379.html

We have to find a way to live in the all of it. In the way people and issues are interconnected. In the wounds and broken places. In our shortcomings, and in the joy of growth and meaningful relationships. In the beauty that exists now, and in the tremendous possibility waiting to be born.