

A Survival Guide to the Modern Christian

Ephesians 4:1-16, 25-26, 29

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Northminster Presbyterian Church

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At the lowest point in his Presidency, when the South was making dangerous gains in the Civil War, the treasury was almost broke, and several of his generals were suffering from typhus, President Lincoln famously wrote to one of his compatriots, “The bottom is out of the tub.” The thing that is supposed to be safe for holding what we need together has given way, spilling its contents everywhere.

A news report this week featured an interview with a man running for the 10th US Congressional District seat in Virginia. Nathan Larson admits he physically and sexually assaulted his ex-wife who subsequently committed suicide. He has expressed a desire to repeal laws criminalizing statutory rape and incest, and to decriminalize every kind of assault within the marriage relationship. He also believes in what he calls “benevolent white supremacy.” His ideas reveal a twisted, malignant world view. He is unlikely to draw more than 1 or 2 percent of the vote, if he is not arrested before the elections this fall. Nathan Larson is but one extreme example of how “the bottom is out of the tub” in our current social and political climate.

At the most recent gathering of a dozen or so Chicagoland Jewish and Presbyterian leaders that I’m now part of, we received a presentation on the state of the nation from a representative of the anti-defamation league. Between 2016 and 2017, the US experienced a never-before-seen dramatic rise in hate crimes. Anti-Jewish, anti-Islamic, anti-gay, anti-woman, and racially motivated acts of hate — all experienced increases of over 25% in violent or destructive acts of hate across the country. And in the Midwest, the increases were larger than the national average. It appears that the hateful, deadly White Nationalist episode in Charlottesville, with public pronouncements that there were good people on both sides has empowered the hate-mongers more than we could have imagined.

Repugnant views are now reported more than challenged. Demonstrable lies flow freely from podiums of power with only minimal pushback. Arrogance, self-interest and what I’ve come to call Randian Americanism is on the rise. The idea that what I want and what I decide is good for me is all that is important, no matter what it does to anyone else.

Last week at the sermon talk back, I was asked this question: “How are we supposed to live in this kind of environment. What does our faith say about how to engage this kind of world?” The very first thought I had when that question was asked was that Ephesians 4 was a good place to start. Last year, I chose it as the text for our sending service for ASP. And then I talked about finding unity between the diverse communities of Evanston and rural Kentucky.

Today I want us to get even more basic. What does it mean in 2018 “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of

the Spirit in the bond of peace”? I suppose the first thing it means is that we don’t do violence to Nathan Larson because of his professed views and his endorsement of actions that turn our stomachs. But it doesn’t stop there. This letter is not advocating some “Kum Ba Yah,” let’s all just get along kind of faith.

This letter was written at a time when the culture was deeply antagonistic to Christianity. It was still a minority religion, made up of people who would not swear fidelity to the Emperor, because to do so would put him at the same level as God, something they would not do. It was a letter that recognized that the actions taken by followers of Jesus in response to the chaos of the world all around them had serious consequences. That’s why the letter goes on to say “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...”

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Webe, is one of my personal heroes. The church-famous Lutheran pastor from Colorado, with her tattoos and liberal dusting of her sermons with profanity, is one of the cultural leaders chosen to be a part of a new national program of feminist leaders called Makers who are trying to make a difference, to harness the power of the shock and dismay so many of us are feeling today and to channel it into constructive change. Nadia’s most recent video on the Makers website is entitled “Welcome to the Apocalypse.” As Nadia says in her introduction “pull up a chair and make yourself uncomfortable.”

The central message of Nadia’s message is the central message of apocalyptic literature in scripture, the idea that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Empires fall, tyrants fade, systems die — God is still around.

The role of apocalyptic literature in the Bible is to reveal — literally that’s what *apocalypso* means in the Greek, uncovering or revealing. So apocalyptic messages in the Bible are meant to reveal that all of this we are experiencing as chaos and a collapse of decency is actually not showing us anything new, but revealing what has been here all along, creating a moment for us to say: “No, that is not who we are going to be. Those are not systems or ideas or world views that are going to prevail.” And then to say yes once again to the callings we each received there at our baptisms, callings that are affirmed every time we come to this table. For the values of this table are perhaps the most enduring ones that reveal how false and wrongheaded so many of the ideas floating around out there are.

At the table set by Christ all who hunger and thirst for righteousness are invited. There is no test for entry; there is no exclusive VIP table or bread; there is one bread, one body and one Lord of all. At the table set by Christ we aren’t fed simply to fill our stomachs. We are fed spiritually, so that we are empowered for the work that lies ahead. We are fed love and grace and hope and a peace that can withstand the chaos of the world we encounter so that we can, in Nadia’s words, “pull up a chair and get uncomfortable” because it takes energy, strength, courage and nerve to get uncomfortable and confront destructive forces and ideas.

But how do we do that? The letter suggests we do it by growing up into Christ. Later in the letter it will be explained that means imitating Christ, the Christ who was not afraid to

confront the powers enslaved to might and death, the Christ who was also not afraid to learn from those societies that had been rejected and ignored—the sick, the sinful, the unclean woman, the blind man, the dying child.

But again, we're not God, thanks be to God, so how do we do that? To imitate God means to embrace a mindset like the one quoted in the Letter to the Philippians: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave..." (Phil. 2: 5-7)

When we realize we belong to God and are to imitate God, how do we go about it? It begins by making our hearts and our church a place that builds up others, by being kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. Just before the author of the Letter to the Ephesians calls his readers to be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving, he addresses the issue of anger as something that can keep people from being imitators of God. Anger, we know, is not sin in and of itself. Whether it is sinful depends on our handling it, not it handling us. We hear: "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." Then, a couple of verses later we hear, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up." That's difficult and anyone who thinks otherwise hasn't spent much time with people they disagree with, or people who are acting irrationally or, well really, most people.

Called to be imitators of God? What if we practiced the handling of our anger the way a Quaker once described to a friend what he did when provoked? "Friend, I will tell you," the man began. "I was naturally as hot and violent as you are. I knew that to indulge temper was sinful and imprudent. I observed that people in a passion always spoke louder or higher. The voice is like a violin string—add stress and the pitch changes. I have therefore made it a rule never to allow my voice to rise in frustration, and by careful observance of this rule I have, by the blessing of God, mastered my natural temper." A good practice for even the most mild-mannered of us!

As imitators of God, as beloved children, we do not have to produce the love that makes us beloved. Christian love that imitates God is not a product of what we do. It is a response to an act by God, the loving self-offering of Christ who loved us and died and lived again for us. The product of this act is called grace.

What all this means is that our invitation is not so much a response to the well-known question "What would Jesus do?" as it is to be a response to the question "What would Jesus have US do?" And that answer is to imitate the love of God, starting in this place, giving time and space in our lives for building up one another, making this community of faith not just a place of worship and welcome but of empowerment and engagement, so that together we cannot simply face the world and all of its chaos but speak truth about what has been revealed in this particular cultural moment so that we can humbly, yet powerfully, direct our love, our strength, our hope centered in the love, hope, grace and peace of Christ to its transformation one day, one person, one defiant act of love and compassion at a time. May God make it so. Amen.