

It's Like Herding Cats!

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How many of you remember the year 2000 Super Bowl commercial “Cat Herders” that was created for the company Electronic Data Systems? Using the idiom “herding cats” as a metaphor for the difficulty of managing a team and unifying their efforts. It shows cowboys herding thousands of cats across the Montana prairie. The commercial is considered one of the most memorable Super Bowl ads of all time and ends with the resolution “EDSolved.” Their product solved the challenge of herding cats.

After reading Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, in which he implores the followers of Christ for harmony and peace with an emphasis on unity, I thought about the history of the Christian church, and this commercial popped into my mind. My apologies for reducing all of us into a bunch of kitties.

So, I thought that this morning I would take an historical perspective on the Christian church and its evolution, to review some of the major events, the repercussions, and maybe more importantly, the lessons for us today and our future trajectory.

Hasn’t this unity thing been a challenge since Jesus called the first twelve disciples? In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the authors highlight the argument about who was the greatest among them, which occurred, at the most inopportune time, during the evening of the last supper. What is Jesus’ response? He washes their feet in a demonstration of humility and tells them, “Be not so among you.” A lesson for us all.

Probably the earliest landmark event was the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Called by Roman Emperor Constantine 1, who sought to achieve unity within the Christian Church, which was becoming increasingly divided on theological disputes, as well as selfishly beneficial for the stability of the Roman Empire. Although there had been a series of Popes who followed Peter, none had the power of Emperor Constantine to create such a significant gathering that produced such consequential results. Here’s a partial list:

1. The Council of Nicaea was crucial in defining the orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity and the nature of Christ. Specifically, it debunked the Arian theory that argued that Christ was a created being and not co-eternal with God the Father. The council then authored the original Nicene Creed, which became a foundational statement of Christian faith.
2. The council set a precedent for resolving theological disputes through ecumenical councils, reinforcing the idea of a unified, authoritative Church.
3. It also marked a significant collaboration between the Church and the Roman Empire. No, Christian nationalism is not a recent phenomenon.

In 1054 AD, there was the formal separation between the Western Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Disputes over modifications to the Nicene Creed, the authority of the Pope and the governance model used by the Western Church, the languages (Latin vs. Greek)

and of course liturgical practices. It has now been nearly a century, and attempts at reconciliation have only achieved modest results.

The crusades, which took place from the late eleventh to the late thirteenth centuries, had multiple purposes, driven by religious, political, and socio-economic factors. Here are some of the primary purposes behind the crusades:

1. Reclaim Jerusalem and other holy sites in the Middle East from Muslim control. Jerusalem was considered sacred as the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.
2. Christians believed the Crusades served as an act of penance and offered spiritual rewards.
3. The Byzantine Empire had requested aid because they were under threat from the Muslim Turks and also to halt Islamic expansion.
4. European nobles and knights saw the crusades as an opportunity to gain land, wealth, and titles. It also offered the opportunity to acquire lucrative trade routes, establishing new markets in acquired territories.
5. Is that enough?

Doesn't it seem to you that the Middle East has been under siege forever?

In the sixteenth century came the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli and others challenged the authority and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The specific issues were the authority of the Pope, the nature of salvation, and the selling of indulgences. I have always found the latter to be curious, since Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple, and I can't find anywhere in the New Testament where he tells his followers that you can buy yourself into heaven.

This led to the formation of various denominations including Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans, and over subsequent centuries, the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, etc. You get the picture. Why? Divisions arose from differences in theology, church governance, and social issues. Just look here in Machias. For somewhere around 2,000 residents, we have the Machias Valley Baptist Church, The Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church, The River of God Christian Ministries, The Downeast Baptist Church, St. Aidans Episcopal Church, The Machias Christian Fellowship, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and of course, Centre Street. In his letter, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to unity, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of spirit in the bond of peace. Paul also encourages the Ephesians to embody Christ's teachings. I wonder how Jesus would view us here in Machias. Are we really one with diversity as Paul calls us to be, or are we one in name only?

As some of you know, I grew up Catholic and attended Catholic schools through the twelfth grade. In 1982, Carol and I joined the Congregational church pastored by Dave Norling. Recently, I had an interesting experience that highlighted the reason why we have so many different communities of worship. I had spoken at a workshop and ended up going out to dinner with four people, all of whom were Catholic. Somehow, we got on the subject of Communion during worship. Our divide couldn't have been more clear: an open communion table vs. a Catholic Communion table preceded by confession and baptism in the Catholic church. Our discussion was civil, and we simply agreed to disagree. While I respect the rules and rituals of the Catholic Church, the next time I was in a Catholic Mass, I took communion.

So let's look at the here and now. If we were to list the core values of the above churches that I named above, there are a wide variety of issues that divide us. Bible inerrancy, church governance, role of women in churches, abortion, social justice, gender roles and the LGBTQ+ community—and this just scratches the surface. And today, as we head toward a hotly contested election, Christian nationalism is becoming just one more divisive topic.

At its simplistic roots, Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that merges Christian identity with national identity, advocating for the belief that a nation should be governed according to what Christian nationalists view as traditional Christian values. It involves the idea that the nation's laws, institutions, and culture should reflect and promote Christian beliefs and practices, but often those values don't teach us to love one another. Instead, they teach us to look, act and talk like us and only worship the same God that we do. They're definitely not what I would call Christian values.

Now, I for one have always been comfortable with my Christian faith sitting side by side with my patriotic feeling of being an American without conflating the two. As a Boy Scout, hundreds of times I said the scout oath, "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my Country." Singing patriotic hymns in church to celebrate Memorial Day or the Fourth of July always seemed appropriate. But there are now many in the country, including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, who want to go much further. A good example is the recent ruling by the Oklahoma state superintendent that both the Bible and the Ten Commandments will be taught in all public schools. I'm guessing that none of the current teachers have extensive training in scripture, so will it be up to the state to establish the curriculum?

Many on the right side of the political spectrum, including former president Trump who met him recently in Mara Lago, hold Victor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary, in very high regard for his governance of Hungary. Orban calls his ideology "illiberal Christian democracy," and since his election in 2010, he has managed to curtail the press, weaken the judicial system, and undermine multi-party democracy. Carol and I were in Hungary recently, and we listened to the reality of what is happening firsthand, from a professor who had been given her latest teaching materials handed down from the government. She is horrified with what she calls "the dumbing down of the next generation of students." Anti-immigrant Orban is losing the brightest students and the working population, so he has had to begin bringing immigrants in from Asia to fill thousands of job vacancies. How he has rigged the elections is worth your time to research if you are interested. Victor Orban, the model for the political right and Donald Trump.

Okay, so here we are in Machias, Maine, trying to figure out a way to fight Christian nationalism, which has been imbedded in our Christian history since the Council of Nicaea of 325 AD. What can we, as individuals and as a congregation, do in the face of some very disturbing possible outcomes?

First and foremost, with so much divisiveness in our country and on social media, we need to take the high road, and make sure that we do all the simple things that can make a difference. How we treat workers in the grocery or hardware stores, how we engage with fellow drivers, holding the door for the person behind us, maybe even paying it forward for someone in the drive through. We must be examples.

Second, as Paul says, Christ has given each of us roles for building up the body of Christ. There are many examples in this congregation, and we should be public about it, in conversations with neighbors, on social media and the press.

Third, really pray for, as Paul said to the Ephesians, “Harmony and peace among believers.” Would it be appropriate to gather faith leaders from Machias and the area to discuss our common ground and not what separates us? Could we share sacred practices and maybe begin an interfaith group that could have conversations that would start small and evolve to be able to handle the bigger ideological differences in non-threatening ways.

Fourth, Paul tells us to no longer be children blown about by every wind of doctrine. We need to educate ourselves through multiple sources of information, such as Jim Wallis’s book that we’ll be studying in the fall, but also including news sources and other perspectives that we may not normally listen to or agree with.

Finally, Paul issues maybe the toughest challenge, to “speak the truth in love.” Christian nationalism makes Jesus and his teachings a victim of identity theft, and each of us need to find a way to respond. I recently participated in a demonstration on a main street in Massachusetts where the signs we held were all about how Jesus preached love, not hate. As a veteran Vietnam war protestor, I know eventually these have an effect. The greater Boston interfaith group, which includes many different Christian denominations including my UCC church in Massachusetts, but also the Jewish and Muslim traditions, is wrestling with concrete ways to address the divisiveness of Christian nationalism.

So I guess I’m wondering in closing, how will we as individuals and as a congregation respond?
Amen.