

Luke 18:1-5

Rev. Harold (Hal) Porter  
Harbor U. U. Congregation  
July 7, 2019

## AMERICAN CIVIC RELIGION

or

### What Does It Mean to Be A Citizen in The Era That Is Trump?

Karl Bart is one of Germany's great Christian theologians. He left Nazi Germany in order to save his life. But from exile he delivered sermons read my many. He used to say he composed them with one hand on the Bible and the Other on the Newspaper. That has been my life as well in the 58 years of my ministry, to always be concern with the nexus between religion and politics.

I, as does Betty, wake up every morning with the N Y Times, viewed not by us as the President suggests, as the enemy of the people, the bearer of fake news, but as the safest place to find the truth in print journalism.

Actually, when I wake up during the night, in order settle me down and return to sleep, I recite, along with 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the First Amendment which protects all newspapers. “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, Or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, Or abridge the freedom of speech, Or of the Press, Or the right of the people peaceable to assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances.” I consider that the most spiritual statement of liberty ever to be written into law.

So, bear with me this morning as I speak of civic religion, the immediate crisis facing our country, and finally what we individuals might due to earn better grades in citizenship.

Let be begin with Marlene Dowd, N Y Times hard hitting columnist, in an article she wrote several weeks ago titled “Yankee Doodle Donnie”. She begins,

“**Halloween** is sugary. **Thanksgiving** is fattening and fraught. **Christmas** is expensive. **New Year's Eve** is annoying. **Memorial Day** is laced with melancholy. **George Washington's Birthday** isn't even on his birthday anymore. **Columbus Day** has some real issues. But we could always count on **the Fourth of July**.

Such a nice carefree American celebration, smack in the middle of summer, and still on the same day that those wicked-smart guys in Philadelphia pulled off that miracle. (The USA!)

It's a great big national picnic, especially in Washington.

Last year I must have taken 50 blurry pictures of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial framed by red and green starbursts. It was one of those nights when you're just happy to be an American.

But now Donald Trump, certified Roman candle, is spoiling America's fireworks show. On a whim Trump is going to turn a holiday that had somehow managed to remain nonpartisan and playful into a MAGA rally.

He tweeted in February that he was going to hijack the Lincoln Memorial on Independence Day for "Major fireworks display, and entertainment and an address by your favorite President, me!"

Of course, Maureen Dowd isn't the first to refer to our President as a pyromaniac, meaning one who has an irresistible urge to cause chaos and upset normality.

Kamala Harris spoke up for the 4<sup>th</sup> also saying, "I think the president needs to realize it's America's birthday, not his."

Well, I had already written all this before the 4<sup>th</sup> and if it didn't come out as Dowd and Harris feared, I would now write maybe they were being a little hasty in their fears. But since the 4<sup>th</sup> has passed, and the party held, I think their fears were justified. But that would not be the case with a host of Americans who loved the show, tanks and all – and they are good people, who love this President.

No, we are a seriously divided country and it has truly become the Trump era. Wondrously, he has attacked our nation's greatest friends and allies, to show who is boss, and instead hails the strength of authoritarian non-democratic leaders and autocrats. All our allies are totally in confusion as to what to believe any more about us, especially sad that we have given up as the leader of the free democratic world.

The respected historian, Jon Meacham, who just completed a book on the Presidents that have led our country with distinction, also shrugged, "We are

going to be dealing with this for a long time... We know that the presidency has not changed Donald Trump. But we don't yet know as to what extent Donald Trump has changed the presidency."

Even if you support Donald Trump, or don't, we must all be wary that we are now living in a "post-trust, facts optional era." It is common knowledge from the left and the right, from his supporters and those that are not, that our President cannot be trusted to tell the truth. Yes, I know none of us is perfect with it. But he has lied or miss spoke more than anyone in the history of the Presidency. According to the Washington Post's Fact Checker, he has done so 10,796 times up through June. Staggering.

And, there is a second thing we all also know, if you question his judgment, you will automatically receive a tweet, demeaning you, all wrap up in a clever but belittling, humiliating nick name. Hundreds of them have been recorded but I won't name them and add to their hurt. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Who ever came up with that? It's not true. Thy hurt and Trump has perfected it.

But are lying to us all and demeaning anyone who does not support him, sufficient grounds for impeachment? Perhaps not. But after all, we the people have assembled this country together, and all of us have agreed to unite around our Constitution with all of its values, and serve its purposes, and defend its politics. And as all of us, are not above the law, neither is the President, even while in office. As the Mueller Report sums up on its last page, "...the fundamental principle of our government is no person in this country is so high that he is above the law."

Ben Franklyn, after voting September 17, 1787 for the Constitution, that we still live by, was asked by a citizen anxious to know what kind of government they came up with, replied, "A Republic," he said, "if you can keep it." In other words, it is up to all of us!

Perhaps to be more correct, we democratically decided to be a Republic. Which means that we elect individuals who represent us within an agreed to Constitution composed of the Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches of government, with definite checks and balances of each other. One of my daughters reminded me, worried that I am about this country, that Checks and balances is a hopeful thing. And it is. But if not done well, something will have to give, and it may not be good.

Yes it is good to remember that our founders were radical. Radical republicans, that is, because they equally believed that final authority was derived entirely from the people, not a King, or a President, or Party.

That is why the Constitution begins with “We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

The Declaration of Independence gave us our spiritual foundation, that we all are created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights – life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, among them.

And the Constitution is how we citizens work this spiritual foundation out.

Our founders did try hard to build a system of government that would be fair to all the states, protecting minorities from majorities, and an even-handed rule of law and order for all citizens. They knew the rule of law within a liberal democracy was the best chance of civilization’s advancement. Yes, our Republic is worth saving.

The President seems to think so too, but with a twist. At one of his many rallies even after his election, he declared in Texas, “We are putting America first. We are taking care of ourselves for a change. You know what a globalist is, a person who wants the globe to do well, but frankly not caring about our own nation so much. You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, okay? I’m a nationalist!” as he literally hugs the American flag.

Go to the common dictionary and you will find that, a patriot is proud of his country for what it does and a nationalist is proud of his country no matter what it does.

A nationalist person strongly identifies with their own nation and vigorously supports its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the other nations.

Professor of History at Harvard, Jill Lepore, in her new book, *The Case For the Nation*, “Patriotism is animated by love, nationalism by hatred. To confuse the one for the other is to pretend that hate is love and fear is courage.”

Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin were nationalists, so is Putin, so are those who tried to get Great Britain out of the European Union. It was Nationalism which initiated WWII and it was globalism that restored Europe. Nationalism is creeping over European unity today. Nationalism, sadly, is creeping over European unity today.

It's the cry of my country first. But the patriot declares my country when right and to be corrected when wrong.

And though Trump may denigrate globalism, our glob's health and heartbeat will demand all countries work together to counter its erosion.

The word nation is not in our Declaration, which claims global aims and only twice in our Constitution but not referring to us. We came together to form not a nation but The United States of America, and we truly have become a melting pot, persons from many nations.

President Obama spoke of this, "I am the son of a black man from Kenya, a white woman from Kansas. These people are part of me. And they are part of America. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, cousins across three continents, and, as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."

But, I hardly need tell you that these United States are on the brink of a Constitutional Crisis and not just because of the difference between nationalists and patriotism. Our three equal branches of government are at logger heads over the rule of law.

Let me suggest what the very immediate crises before us is.

Regardless of what the President says that the Mueller Report vindicated him, that he did not collude with the Russians nor did he obstruct the investigation. That is **not** what the Mueller Report has said.

The Report did say, First, "**The Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion.**" Something the President has many times dismissed, siding with Putin than with his own CIA and FBI.

Two, "**Although the investigation established that the Russian government perceived it would benefit from a Trump presidency and had worked to**

**secure that outcome, and that the (Trump) Campaign expected it would benefit (from it)...the investigation did not establish that the Trump Campaign coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities.”** That’s good to know despite 140 known contacts between Trump aides and the Russians. More may still come out, however.

Three, **“Finally, history provides no reason to believe that any asserted chilling effect justifies exempting the President from the obstruction laws.”** Which means that no one is above the law including the President, in or out of office. And now for the very last paragraph in the Report a part from its legalese language.

In conclusion, Mueller is really saying, after all our searching, for almost two years with a host of lawyers, if we could not find any evidence of obstruction by the President, we would have said so. But we do not say so. We did state the President did not commit a crime, for that is what other judicial jurisdictions of our government must decide. But clearly, this Report **does not exonerate him.**

Here is what appears will be happening next. Since our new Attorney General Bill Barr, was the person that received the Mueller Report and he quickly examined it and announced publicly “that the evidence developed during the special counsel’s investigation is not sufficient to establish that the president committed an obstruction-of-justice offense.”

This was several weeks before the Report, heavily redacted, was available to anyone else.

This allowed the President, during the three weeks before the public could read it, to over and over again, declare that the Report exonerated him – no collusion, no obstruction! But when the public finally got the report and read it, it became clear that Barr had got it wrong, and it smelled of a national coverup. And it also became clear that Mueller, himself, felt the report has been misinterpreted to the nation by Barr. Mueller is now prepared to be examined more fully by Congress on July 17<sup>th</sup>. We have another daughter who is reading the Report and sighed to me Mueller seems to live by greater virtues than most of us. He has been a pure patriot.

And now, there are several dozen Democratic members of the House of Representatives pushing, Nancy Pelosi to move toward impeachment but it appears they will do nothing until after Mueller speaks.

But there is one lonely Republican Representative in congress, Justin Amash, a strong believer in the Constitution, who he believes should be served above one's Party. He has now declared, rather courageously, that:

1. Attorney General Barr has deliberately misrepresented Mueller's Report.
2. President Trump has engaged in impeachable conduct.
3. Partisanship has eroded our system of checks and balances.
4. Few members of Congress have read the report.

Well, I have, and I concur with Amash. Of course, the President, in turn, has called Amash a dumbass, a disloyal member of congress, a total loser, a total lightweight. Amash, in response, has now left the Republican Party and will be an Independent. His district seems to support him overall.

More significantly though, over 1,000 Republican and Democratic prosecutors, from across the federal system and the country, have written a letter in response to The Mueller Report, citing extensive evidence of just what the president did to obstruct justice, indicating if he were not President, there would have been multiple felony charges against him for obstruction of justice.

Let me pause. It certainly looks like the President finally got the Attorney General he wanted in Bill Barr and Barr quickly chose, contrary to the evidence in the report, to exonerate him. If nothing is done, the rule of law will be covered over by the rule of man.

So, we will be having some stressful times in our next several months, and it may unfortunately get nasty. So how then to respond as a Citizen in the days ahead in this coming Constitutional Crisis?

RESIST was the chosen word throughout our land immediately after President Trump was inaugurated.

And what took place to my mind, was one of the greatest protests of our time, and actually was the largest single such gathering, ever in Washington. And it spilled over massively in cities around our country, and even some parts of the world.

The women's **March on Washington** had several issues but they all came together to declare they would resist any effort to divide this country, to stand up in support of all our differences, as in one of our country's beloved mottos,

**E pluribus Unum**, that from the many, we are one. One of multi-cultures, sexual orientations, races, sexes, all Americans.

And the direct consequence of that march, of many, was a larger than ever midterm election, bringing fresh and diverse persons into our congress and state governments.

The women were acting like the badgering women in Jesus parable of the Unjust Judge. She kept on coming on and coming on until vindicated.

**The Women's March** was a **Resistance! And a Reckoning!** And we need to continue it since it was done so liberally, and respectfully, as our great First Amendment says, "the right of the people peacefully to assemble, and petition our government for a redress of grievances, shall not be abridged" And those grievances, while many have been met, many still need redressing.

But let me say, Amen to that movement, and add a closing thought from David Brooks, another wonderfully sensitive, N Y Times columnist who suggest how we now may move forward beyond Resistance. In his column, "The Racial Reckoning Comes" he introduced a colleague, **Eric Liu**.

"Eric is an enlighten Seattle progressive, but with a reconciling, loving temperament. His hero is Abraham Lincoln and his goal is to heal a divided nation."

I immediately sent for Eric's book, *Becoming America*. And I discovered that Liu acts with a heart slightly to the left. Since the election of Trump, Eric and his wife have established the "**Citizen University**" which hosts regular **Civic Saturday's** services that resemble the form of the services held here on Sundays, or as in other religious gatherings. They sing, recite, listen to a teaching. They have no explicit creed except to lift up some of the great texts that have resounding throughout our American History, such as our nation's founding documents, the Declaration, the Constitution, Walt Whitman's poetry, M L King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and so on. They focus on some Civic theme and have sermon on it as well.

They like the service to have a religious fervor but they claim no religion, but lift up the proverbial truths such as the Golden Rule, and wisdom, such as "We are all better off - when we are all better off." What they are venerating in these Civic Saturdays is not a particular God, but America. And America needs

such disciples of love. The Civic Saturday services, that are happening right now around the country, are not like a flag waving pep rally but a time of serious, soul searching, open discernment of this country's successes and failures. It's American Civic Religion.

When becoming a Naturalize American citizen, there is a last act needed, after many previous qualifications are satisfied including a test which focuses on 100 questions that the candidate may be asked to respond to. Having satisfied these, the last act is to stand and swear to a rather long vow of allegiance to the United States of America. They are told when you sit down, you will be fully an America citizen!

But most of us have not had to make a vow to the USA, being born here. Nor have we been quizzed as to our civic understanding. So, the faculty of **Citizen University**, decided that we ought to all become a **Sworn Again American**. Here is their model:

I pledge to be an active American.

To show up for others, to govern myself, to help govern my community.

I recommit myself to my country's creed: To cherish liberty as a responsibility.

I pledge to serve and to push my country:

When right, to be kept right; when wrong to be set right.

Wherever my ancestors and I were born, I claim America

And pledge to live like a citizen.

Friends, I suggest in these immediate days ahead, in this post-truth, facts optional era, that we speak the truth as we understand it, and do it with civility and courageously. Let us be willing to cross what ever aisles that divide us from others, and reach out, and listen, and share as citizens-united by our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution with its 27 amendments, not to go backward to some sort of great golden American past, but forward. On to more just and inclusive amendments, that will let everyone in our next upcoming censuses feel they truly are counted and embraced. Keep up with the **Resistance**, yes! But add **Engagement** with it. Vote in 2020 out of civic love for our country.