

Courage in the Struggle Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
January 14, 2021 Second Week of Epiphany, Martin Luther King Jr. Day
Luke 4:14-30

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says that God promises us “courage in the struggle for justice and peace.” We need that courage, because that struggle needs us now.

People acting in the name of Christ carrying crosses and banners, urged on by their pastors, attacked the Capitol police and Congress and the structure of our democracy. They knelt in the street praying the way the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights Movement did, at the same time concealing more weapons than they used, and prepared to do more violence than they did. They claim to represent the way and spirit of Jesus, they sincerely believe they are on the side of light and love, and they are convinced that anyone who opposes them is evil.

Their goal, in Senator Hawley’s words, is “To take the Lordship of Christ...into the public realm, and to seek the obedience of the nations. Of our nation!” And they are willing to destroy the United States of America as a democratic republic if that is what it takes.

We need to be very careful not to condemn all Christians who are right of center, and at the same time we need to acknowledge that groups promoting [white supremacist evangelical Christian nationalism](#) have been [growing exponentially](#), fueled by the conspiracy theories and lies [promoted by the President](#) and many other popular leaders.

These groups are now on the attack and are organizing to be even more aggressive on Inauguration Day, and it will not stop there. They consider themselves engaged in a holy war. An astounding number of them believe that Democrats are Satan-worshipping pedophile sex-traffickers who steal elections and seek to crush Christianity. (17% of Americans feel certain this is true and 37% believe it may be true according to an [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) in December.)

This is hard to hear, it is hard to bear, and we may feel inclined to hide or ignore it, but if we do, it is no longer hard to imagine that we will find ourselves living in a fascist, totalitarian state.

It took only ten years for Hitler to come to power after a small, relatively weak Nazi party in Germany staged an insurrection very similar to what we have just seen. To say it can’t happen here is no longer rational. It can, and it very well could. Donald Trump is only one of many elected leaders intent on breaking the democracy they have taken oaths to protect.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, “I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of [people] willing to be co-workers with God.”

Jesus is a model of courage in the struggle for justice and peace. His entire ministry shows this, first as a spiritual program, helping people be transformed so that they could help transform the world; second, in his constructive program to heal and empower hurting, oppressed people; and third, in his obstructive program to overcome systemic evils and overturn corrupt, exclusionary laws and traditions. We have those same three ways to respond to our crisis today.

You can see those three approaches at work in the story Luke tells of Jesus in his home synagogue. His ministry had just begun but he was already famous when he came to Nazareth. He was invited to read scripture and he chose the passage from Isaiah that says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

Jesus presented a spiritual teaching aimed at transforming people, he modeled standing with courage in the struggle for justice and peace, and he implicitly issued a call for others to join in constructive ways to aid the poor and oppressed.

The people in the pews were supportive, but then Jesus went further and reminded them of times when great prophets judged the religious people of Israel as being corrupt and blessed virtuous non-Jews instead. Jesus made it clear that he would stand obstructively against anyone who was not good news to the poor and the oppressed, who was not engaged in the struggle for justice and peace. As King put it, “the appalling silence of the good people” was allowing evil to continue and grow, and Jesus was not going to let that silence go unchallenged.

Today many of our fellow Christians are actively seeking to destroy the democratic process, and they are violating the peace in order to promote policies that cause injustice—racial, social, economic and environmental.

Jesus is not going to let our silence go unchallenged. So what can we do as followers of Jesus, spiritually and constructively and obstructively?

Spiritually there are three things. One is that we can learn and practice some form of contemplative prayer or meditation, because it opens us most effectively to the creative guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. It speeds the transformation of our consciousness to be more like the heart and mind of Christ.

Second, we can follow the path of spiritual growth through kenosis, metanoia and agape, reducing the control our ego or false self exercises over our daily lives, seeking a wider and wiser perspective of oneness and enlarging our capacity for compassion and acts of Christ-like love.

The third spiritual task is to proclaim boldly and effectively that the way that Jesus taught is not the way that the white supremacist evangelical Christian nationalists are showing. We need to oppose fanatical fundamentalism of any kind, religious or secular, and proclaim another perspective and approach to life.

Senator Hawley has attacked progressive Christianity for its heresy of Pelagianism. This gets to the heart of the culture war within Christianity. To have a correct understanding of Pelagianism I urge you to read the first chapter of the book *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, by J. Philip Newell. Most other sources fail to share what Pelagius actually said.

Pelagius was a leading theologian from Wales in the early 400s who became prominent when he moved to Rome. He taught women how to read the scriptures and he believed that humanity and the earth are inherently good because God created them and blesses them. Pelagius taught that evil exists, and we need the grace of Christ's Spirit to overcome evil in our hearts and in the world, but the light of God is always in us however overshadowed it may become.

These teachings turned Augustine against him. Augustine taught that everyone and everything is inherently evil from birth and can be redeemed only by baptism in the church and by a committed faith in Jesus. Pelagius was vindicated by two councils in Jerusalem and one in Rome where even the Pope endorsed his teachings, but then Augustine's side switched tactics and appealed to the secular Roman emperor. Augustine won that political struggle and the loving, inclusive theology of Pelagius became secondary to Augustine's harsh, exclusivist one.

We can see the world that resulted from Christians feeling free to exploit and destroy the earth and the lives of non-Christian people. Progressive Christianity has swung back toward the

perspective of Pelagius on the loving spirit of Jesus and Biblical teachings of the blessing and indwelling light of all Creation.

Many like Senator Hawley believe that Christian and secular Pelagianism have corrupted Democrats and moderate Republicans and the entire democratic process, and they are prepared to do violence in order to establish fundamentalist Christianity as national and even global “Lordship” and law.

We need to proclaim loudly that we, as Christians, stand against this theology and its world-view and actions and ambitions.

We need to do that by words, but also by constructive programs that build a fair, inclusive, equitable, just, peaceful, environmentally sustainable and healthy society, and also by obstructive programs that put our bodies on the line in nonviolent resistance to violence and injustice.

The people of Nazareth took Jesus by force to throw him off a cliff, and eventually the authorities in Jerusalem crucified him. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in jail countless times, he and his family received daily death threats for years, his home was bombed and eventually he was assassinated. This does not happen to everyone who has courage in the struggle for justice and peace, but we know it could happen to anyone.

We know that there are people now who have been incited to violence against any form of opposition.

This is hard, but history teaches that ignoring it will make it only harder. History also teaches us that we can do hard things, we can speak truth to power, we can offer nonviolent resistance, we can put forth alternative messages and models. Love can overcome fear, light can drive back the shadow of evil.

We can do this, and we need to do it now. Our nation cannot wait. Our despairing children cannot wait. Our earth cannot wait. Let us search our hearts and join our minds together to formulate our response.

And as we face this hard reality, let us celebrate the comfort and joy that past movements have found in their solidarity and in the knowledge that they were courageous instruments of justice and peace. Let us turn to God and rest in complete trust that God’s love shall overcome. Let us pray in silence...