

# **SAINT JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

St. Cloud, Minnesota

May 2024

From the Wardens and Vestry:

## **CHRISTIAN AND AMERICAN**

### **HOW WE KEEP DISCIPLESHIP AND PATRIOTISM TOGETHER**

How to be both Christian and American? – a question both theological and political. There are many ways to sort it – and the very notion that there are “many ways” is itself a theological statement, because these days there are very loud voices that say there is only one way: You can't be a real American unless you are a real Christian, and “real Christian” is attuned to a strict definition of “real American” – all as though it's what the Framers or Founders intended.

As our bishop, the Rt. Rev. Craig Loya, has written, “a dangerous and idolatrous Christian nationalism surges today, and we have an obligation to speak out and resist any and all ways that the name of Jesus or Christian is invoked by those who violently insist on a narrow understanding of our national identity.”<sup>1</sup>

Our presiding bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, has spoken with equal forthrightness: “It's not conservative Christianity. Obviously, it's not liberal Christianity either. What we're actually describing is an ideology that's not really a religion, but it looks like a religion and invokes language and symbols that have religious traffic. ... If you look at the complex of white Christian nationalism, as an ideology, you lay it alongside Jesus of Nazareth and we're not even talking about the same thing.”<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental issue is this: How do you decide what is “Christian”? A bumper sticker suggests it's easy: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” To know “what God said,” all you need to do is read the Bible – where you can find a text that will support just about anything. If “I believe it,” I can show you somewhere in the Bible that “God said it” – clearly, unmistakably.

That's not how we read the Bible. If “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9) and “Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Isaiah 43:19) are both authoritative, then we have some interpretive work to do. And we remember that Jesus took cues from earlier texts – especially the prophets – which say much about hospitality, about mercy, about compassion. The temptation to extricate Jesus from the Jewish context has bedeviled the church from its earliest days, and we align ourselves with those who have resisted it.

“America First” is not a Christian declaration. It’s not even an American one. The “shining city set on a hill” is a beacon, not a fortress. It’s for the healing of the nations, not for encouraging them to attack each other. And there are breaches in America that need repairing.

## **A BANQUET, NOT A BATTLE**

To acknowledge that the human beings who were already here were nearly obliterated by those who came from Europe; that many of the founders were slaveholders; that the Constitution was shaped by abhorrent views about Black people and women – this is not to hate our nation; it’s to love it as a work in progress. It’s to be honest about who we were and are – who we all are – as Americans.

There is nothing Christian or American about accusing immigrants of “polluting our blood.” Moreover, that use of “our” to mean white European ancestry runs against both the Christian conviction that everyone is made in God’s image and the American experience of immigration as the lifeblood of society and economy.

Identity and gender are especially controversial issues these days. Just as we believe science has properly revised the literal reading of the creation story, we believe also that science has demonstrated that identity and gender are more fluid than people two millennia ago understood. We believe, in fact, that God is speaking still, and that new knowledge is part of what is being said. It is not American to stigmatize those who don’t fit the binary stereotype, and it is not Christian to go even further and claim that God reviles them.

The claim that adherents of religions other than Christianity aren’t true Americans is American heresy, and to say that America is “a Christian nation” expunges them from the ranks of “We the people.” The claim is also not Christian. There have certainly been times when and places where authorities have insisted that Christian identity – of a sort that they define – is a requirement of citizenship, but those times are among the darkest blights on Christian history. We see intercultural and interfaith dialogue as a banquet, not a battle.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

One place where disagreements about “American” and “Christian” come into especially sharp focus today is education, more particularly, public education. Some Christians believe that they must create specifically Christian schools, and pull their children out of public schools. Others believe that the public schools themselves must be remade in the image of their notion of what a “Christian” education looks like; they have declared that “The path to save the nation is very simple – it’s going to go through the school boards.”<sup>3</sup>

Censoring the truth of our history, banning books, permitting the teaching only of what certain political agendas regard as the “good” parts of the narrative, is not “protecting” kids. The real threat to our nation? It’s shielding kids from the truth that makes sense of the present and prepares them for the future.

We are Christians and Americans who believe that public educators are committed to the flourishing of all children, all of whom are created in the image of God, and as Christians and Americans we will do everything we can to support school board members whose vision of education is shaped by diversity, equity, and inclusion – which we consider to be both Constitutional and Gospel values.

## **PATRIOTISM AND DISCIPLESHIP**

To be both American and Christian is to integrate patriotism and discipleship. We are patriots who acknowledge both the glory and the shame of American history – the fact that 1619 and 1776 are both defining moments. We are disciples who acknowledge both that God’s kingdom is not of this world and that we are co-creators with God, charged with making a world where all can flourish, where we all do better when we all do better.

In this fraught political year of 2024, all of us at Saint John’s Episcopal Church are urged to attend forums, write letters to the editor, challenge candidates for office at all levels – to make plain in whatever ways are available to us our conviction that, as Bishop Curry has said, “[Jesus’s] command to love our neighbors means neighbors of every type, of every faith, not just our own. Through our baptism and in our democracy, we are called to a way of love that creates a community in which the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected, and where all can have an equal say in the governing of our civic life.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Our True Citizenship,” July 5, 2022 (<https://episcopalmn.org/blog/bishop/our-true-citizenship>).

<sup>2</sup> October 26, 2022, cited in <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/10/27/white-christian-nationalism-is-not-christianity-presiding-bishop-says-during-panel-discussion/>.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Bannon, cited in <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3572821-the-gops-school-board-takeover-strategy-is-falling-flat/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/endorsers>.