Truth, hope, compassion in a time of coronavirus and a presidential election

James M. Childs Jr.

Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio

Correspondence
James M. Childs, Jr., Trinity Lutheran Seminary, 2199 E. Main St, Columbus, OH 43209-2334.
Email:jmchilds39@gmail.com

Abstract
Despite signs of public unity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic has also highlighted our divisions, disparities, and racism. The churches can have a voice for greater harmony and community if their public theology flows from their core beliefs and practices and is marked by engagement with truth, and a vision of hope acted out with compassion.

KEYWORDS
community, dialogue, justice, pandemic, public theology, racism

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new national slogan, “we are in this together,” has been on the lips of everyone from politicians to grocery store owners. Could it be that our common experience of polarization is about to be eclipsed? Could this be the historical moment that will dramatically change the human mindset of “us versus them” and lay the foundations for a new sense of unity in which political differences are issue differences, not identity differences, and in which the urgency of survival drives us across racial and ideological barriers toward a greater sense of the common good? Could we really be in this together?

At present the answer, as in much of life, is “yes” and “no.” Yes, the overwhelming majority of Americans have so far shown a readiness to take steps to protect their neighbors by following rules that help curb the spread of the virus. We see countless examples of people offering their resources and services to those particularly hard hit in their communities and neighborhoods. We have come to appreciate how people of all walks of life and all racial identities have stepped up.

Ordinary people have become our heroes: nurses, doctors, first responders, care-givers, truck and bus drivers, grocery clerks, and other essential workers. Sadly, many have paid a price of sickness or even death for their service. And, it also seems true that most of our people appreciate and struggle together with the terrible tradeoff between health and the economy. We fear and pray for the many unemployed and devastated businesses. We are united in mourning the over 100,000 people of our nation who have died from this virus.

However, it is also a commonly expressed view that this pandemic has cast a brighter light on our divisions. After the initial bipartisan aid packages, the politics of the pandemic revealed familiar patterns of ideological polarization. Moreover and more importantly, in the higher percentage of suffering endured by minority populations the pandemic has exposed the reality of entrenched racism. Other disparities also have been highlighted such as that between those with and those without adequate health care. Children whose parents can afford it find it relatively easy to do their school work from home. They have the technology to do it that children of poorer families often do not. In many cases those whose jobs are at higher risk for infection are among the least well paid.

Meanwhile, continuing sources of division persist while attention is diverted to the deadly effects of this virus. The looming “pandemic” of climate change and what to do about it has yet to galvanize the public will to the degree experts say is required. Defense against COVID-19 is now enjoined to harden an already hardened and deeply divisive immigration policy. Intractable differences over the question of abortion will not go away and is as thoroughly
politicized as ever. Church bodies are still divided over matters of sexuality and same sex marriage and want government and the courts to side with them in public policy, creating yet another civic divide.

For the present the pandemic crisis has captured our attention. However, once we get past the constant threat of COVID-19, will experiences of unity have a lasting impact? Will it have created a sense of mutuality, a sense that we need a more neighborly less divisive society? Will our pulling together to defeat the virus survive being torn apart by yet another senseless killing of a young black man by police? Will we see that making common cause against the virus and against racism are both critical to the life and soul of our society?

The presidential campaign could deepen differences and solidify divisions as it has the potential to do. Or, the public, still immersed in the sorrows and financial challenges of the pandemic and the anger and frustration of racial injustice, could seek a greater commitment to the common good when they cast their votes in local, state, and national elections.

1 | A PUBLIC THEOLOGY FOR THE COMMON GOOD

We wait now to see how the effects of this health crisis will pan out and what we might have learned for the future health of our country. We wait to see if there is a genuine will to confront the enduring evils of white supremacy and racism. It is clearly a time for communities of faith to ask how they can help foster a civil harmony sustained by a vital egalitarian justice. If communities of faith (for me my Christian community) are to engage the toxic reality of bitter division, they need a theology that commits them to that vocation. If their theology of mission is purely parochial, it will not do. If their understanding of the gospel is only about individual salvation, it will not do. If Christian neighbor love is mainly a matter of individual relationships and not also an active commitment to justice, it will not do. If members of the church are not free enough in their faith to join with those of other faiths or no faith in the service of the common good, it will not do. If interest in government is primarily getting their own narrow moral agenda legally established, it will not do. If a church is going to be serious in its work on behalf of a society that is truly just in its commitments to equality, its activism must flow consistently from what is preached and taught, experienced in the sacraments, and nurtured in the communion of the faithful.

A public theology for the common good is not wedded to a partisan political agenda. However, it does have a calling to publically advocate for and seek to protect values relevant to the life and health of the polis. There is a prophetic duty even to the point of righteous anger when these values are compromised or violated. A public theology calls the church to speak truth, instill hope, and show compassion.

2 | TRUTH

Jesus called the devil “the father of lies.” (John 8:44) You do not have to believe in a personal devil to know the demonic effect of lies. Lies divide. Lies deceive and undermine trust. Trust is the foundation of community in an ambiguous and conflictual world where we must struggle together with difficult choices. Jesus also said, that “the truth will make you free,” (John 8:32) free from the self-deception that believes its own version of reality is the only true one. This sort of triumphalism, political or religious, immediately excludes. It obscures truth by failing to recognize the complexity and uncertainties of life and the need for the input of the many.

To use the well-worn phrase, the church must “speak the truth to power” when the deceits of the powerful form the basis of bigotry and injustice, or when they pretend to be something they are not by creating a false narrative to cover greed and self-interest. At the same time, the churches must face their own truth, the truth of their failure to confront the systemic evils that oppress and divide, evils in which they have at times been complicit. Another hard truth for the churches is the divisive effects of arrogant dogmatism and the cruelty of a severe moralism antithetical to the truth of the gospel.

Falsehoods create suspicions and fears that set us against one another. We are then concerned to protect ourselves from each other rather than being open to each other in a mutual quest for a hopeful future. In the absence of a future in which to hope, one greater than ourselves, truth becomes relative to our own self-centered designs amidst the contingencies of an uncertain life.

3 | HOPE

Speaking the truth in judgment does not in itself instill hope. God is the God of steadfast love who is ever merciful and always creating anew. This truth comes to full expression for Christians in the person and work of Jesus, the Christ. It is the truth of the values of God’s promised future unleashed in our present. These are the values Jesus taught in words and action, embodied in self-giving love, died for, and lived for in Easter triumph. Among these values are the victory of life over death, wholeness of body and spirit, and the justice of radical equality, the peace of reconciliation and community, and freedom from all forms of bondage to evils within and without.
These promised values come alive with the power to instill hope when they are modeled in the community of faith, and the faithful seek them in love for their neighbors and their world. When the church, graced in the power of the Spirit, advocates for the sanctity of every life and the resources for health and wholeness it anticipates that future when suffering and death will be no more. When the church embraces all people and eschews all forms of discrimination and exclusion, it anticipates the radical quality of God’s future when “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ.” (Gal.3; 28) When the church does these things and more in the service of God’s promises it is proclaiming the gospel. When it seeks to be a beacon of unity in a world of discord, it is living its baptismal identity, its eucharistic community, and its birthright in the image of the Triune God it confesses.

Loving one another in the community of faith, however imperfectly, can be a sign of hope for those mired in the discords of life. “The one who commands such love is the bringer of the new age which makes love possible and meaningful, so the command that his followers should love as he has loved them.”

Knowing that God is everywhere at work, the church marries its own witness for community wherever there are hopeful signs of harmony such as the coming together we have been seeing in responses to the pandemic and in the protests for justice. However, the churches’ witness for hope and truth will not succeed, will not promote our urgent need for healing, unless it is suffused with compassion.

4 | COMPASSION

Jesus had compassion for the hungry, the sick, and the lost. “Compassion,” a feeling of empathy and solidarity with the suffering, is what Jesus was all about. That is what Christians and their churches need to be all about. That was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s vision of the church in a world that no longer needs its traditional services. The church is called to participation in Christ, the “Man for Others.” “The church is the church only when it is there for others...It must tell people in every calling what a life in Christ is, what it means ‘to be there for others.’” Humility and modesty are among the companion virtues that must replace hubris and the worship of power.

The church will have a voice for the works of justice and reconciliation that make for harmony if it is truly a church for others, a seat of compassion, a compassion of genuinely “being with,” not “feeling sorry for those unfortunates.” The compassion that is born of the love Christ commanded extends to all as he also taught us. The humility that Jesus modeled is a trait of compassionate love that should preserve us from feeling superior to those whose views we may consider less enlightened than our own.

Those whom we disagree with have fears as we do. Deep down we are all desperate for peace in our lives and a future in which to hope. We honor and respect each other’s fears and hopes by being ready to listen to each other in a spirit of openness and mutuality. Dialogue in the congregation is a basic step. As we share our concerns, convictions, longings, and doubts, as we share our common humanity in the freedom of God’s unconditional grace, we may make some remarkable discoveries about each other, discoveries of shared values despite differences. We may learn new insights that can help us see each other more clearly. This is compassion in the give and take of hard conversations.

Thus, for example, by committing to care for each other as we struggle with our most vexing questions, we may muster the courage to confront our own racism. In so doing we gain a voice to combat it in the public square. There is much we can teach our children and much we can learn from them. But the most important thing is the readiness to engage each other with honesty and love.

It is critical also that congregations identify with the social service agencies of their church body as partners in the mission of the church for others. Their compassionate outreach and understanding of the needs of the downtrodden and marginalized informs the church’s essential witness of public advocacy.

Finally, though the dialogue in the congregation is critical, it is also the case that our little church on the corner is not alone in huge tasks before us. We rejoice in being part of a global witness to the faith. Out of the great diversity of the church throughout the world we are all strengthened by gifts of insight, understanding, and inspiration. The church is everywhere where the people are, on the ground. Moreover, the Christian church, when true to its spiritual charter, is one of the few institutions in our world that exists for others, not for itself.

ORCID
James M. Childs Jr. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9177-3441

ENDNOTES
1 Furnish, V. P. (1972). The love Command in the New Testament. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
2 Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). Letters and Papers from Prison. In J. W. de Gruchy (Ed.) and I. Best, L. E. Dahill, R. Krauss, & N. Lukens (Trans.), Dietrich Bonhoeffer works (Vol. 8, p. 503). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

James M. Childs, Jr. is Joseph A. Sittler Emeritus Professor of Theology and Ethics, Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio. He is author of *Ethics in the Comunity of Promise: Faith, Formation, and Decision* and *The Way of Peace: Christian Life in the Face of Discord*.

How to cite this article: Childs JM. Truth, hope, compassion in a time of coronavirus and a presidential election. *Dialog*, 2020;59:172–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12581