

Dear Joy,

I share so many of your concerns, frustrations, and fears. It is indeed hard to tell, on the eve of this bitterly-contested presidential election, whether democracy has much of a future in this country. In the course of my recent travels I've talked to many who are braced for political violence, not in some distant time to come, but in November.

And you are absolutely right that the Christian churches—especially predominantly-White Protestant ones—bear profound responsibility for our current predicament. The old line about how, “when fascism comes to America, it will come wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross,” seems almost self-evident at this point.

It is not just that our fellow White Christians might, again, play a decisive role in entrusting a narcissistic demagogue with the highest office in the land and the power to destroy the whole world. This appalling prospect is mere symptom. There is a much deeper malady at work in both White evangelical and—if we are honest—mainline worlds. Its origins lie in the distant past but its consequences are manifest all around us. I have been dismayed, as I know you have, by White believers' enthusiasm for gun culture amid an epidemic of mass shootings; by their callous response to police violence against persons and communities of color; by their denial of the climate crisis; by their support for laws that target already-vulnerable trans kids; by their trafficking in nativism and cheers for mass deportations; and more.

Lord have mercy.

So I am with you when it comes to the church's past and present complicity in injustice. And I am inspired by your commitment to forming a congregation that will prioritize solidarity with the marginalized and minoritized in these dangerous times. This aspiration resonates with scripture's core teachings about God's character and call upon the church. What you are describing is the kind of faithful witness that our public square desperately needs.

There will be no shortage of challenges as you go about this vital work, of course, and I wanted to write you about one in particular. In this era of cascading crises and with so many lives on the line, how will you and your congregation stand up for righteousness without ending up self-righteous?

Here at the seminary and across the nation I see so many progressive Christians hardening their hearts against any and all who do not see the world and practice their faith exactly as we do. Circles that once opened out are turning inward. Shaming and shunning are not only commonplace but often recast as exemplary. Social media platforms incentivize these behaviors but they are hardly limited to our digital domains. A couple of years ago one White progressive student shared with me that if she were seen even just having coffee with one of her more conservative peers, she would have to explain herself to her friends.

On the one hand, there is nothing surprising about these developments given how hyperpolarized our wider society has become. Across the political spectrum Americans now see those who vote differently from them as not just wrong on the issues but as a serious threat. There can sometimes be truth in that perception. Yet even so, our information ecosystem has evolved such that, the more media that we consume, the more likely we are to believe falsehoods about our neighbors. It is just one small step from there to bearing false witness, and the truth is that there is so much money to

be made on keeping us angry and lonely and staring at screens. Meanwhile, when we take a moment to get some fresh air we walk out into neighborhoods increasingly refashioned in our own image. The Big Sort of recent decades has left us with a country in which we live and shop and eat and, yes, worship, alongside those who share our priors. So if we progressive Christians have come to regard those outside our bubble with increasing suspicion, we are just like everybody else.

But on the other hand, we should allow ourselves to be shocked by how thoroughly we have narrowed Jesus's great commandment. I am confident that if someone arrived from another planet with no prior knowledge of the gospels and observed us for a few days, they would intuit that he said, "Love your like-minded neighbor as yourself." Jesus's even more challenging exhortations—to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us—would be almost completely illegible in our shared life.

My concern is not with progressive Christians bringing the fullness of their convictions into every room and every relationship. In general folks should not suppress their beliefs in order to avoid conflict, let alone water them down in an attempt to meet someone else in an imaginary middle. This is not the way.

We should be bold in proclamation and unafraid to speak the truth. But as the Apostle Paul reminds us, if we have not love, we are a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And too often these days, we have not love. We have allowed scorn and condescension to take deep root in our midst, and the more that we practice these ungenerous arts, the more that we nurture the very resentments and animosities that are driving our churches and our democracy toward ruin.

We have moreover become far too quick to shake the dust off our feet and move on. Sometimes it is warranted. There are bad-faith actors out there in the world. And I know that you have long been worried about the potential harm that can be inflicted, especially on queer and undocumented and Black and Brown folks, when we widen the theological and political horizons of our circles. So I want to be very clear that I don't believe that every person or even every local church bears the responsibility of building every bridge. But if your congregation can't build a particular bridge, can you support others who feel God calling them to do so? At the very least, can you keep your hearts soft toward those on the other side, mustering the will to pray for their flourishing and for God to be at work in their midst?

There will be a powerful temptation, especially with a justice-oriented flock like yours, to conform to the line-drawing ways of this world: on one side of any given question are the good guys, on the other side the bad. Yet one of the foundational insights of the entire Christian tradition is that any such line we might want to draw runs in fact straight through ourselves.

The truth is that God is not done with us—me—yet. I was reminded of this last month, when I reconnected with a once-dear friend who has suffered greatly in her life and who I hadn't seen in more than a decade. In the years since I've been distressed to see her fall deep, deep down a right-wing rabbit hole on social media—so far that I wasn't sure she would even be willing to meet up with me. But she was and we caught up on what has been happening in our families. Part of me hesitated to share the circumstances that brought our latest addition to us through foster care, fearing—based on the memes this friend posts—that she might make a disparaging comment about his biological family. But I did share and the next thing I knew she stopped me in my tracks with a level of moral insight into his mother's experience that I had never begun to approximate.

Truly, as the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once proclaimed, “Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.” May our hearts remain open to encountering Christ even in and through the seemingly least likely of people.

And may they encounter Christ through us too. A few years ago a straight White progressive student shared with me that ever since her brother came out as gay she has wanted nothing to do with Christians who are not affirming. I told her that that was interesting because I have a gay sister and for that very reason am more motivated than ever to engage those who are not affirming (I was long in their number myself). I haven’t left every aspect of my evangelical upbringing behind, I suppose. I still love scripture’s proclamation, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Just last month, through an unexpected turn of events, I ended up having dinner with an unreconstructed Christian nationalist who had nearly every right-wing talking point on nearly every issue down pat. We went around and around for about two hours. It was clear that she was nervous about sharing her views with me. She kept saying, “I hope it’s ok that I say this.” I took her seriously and was candid about my many disagreements. I also talked at length about my own journey and how I have come to read the Bible. It was clear she had never met anyone who took their faith seriously and connected the dots to public life in the way that I did. As we parted ways she said, “you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

I have no idea where she may end up on all these things. What I do know is that we are called to hope for the transformation of others—and of ourselves. Deep transformation is still possible. I know from my own story that even people who seem completely entrenched can change their minds. For me it happened slowly over the course of many years and only because friends who knew better loved me when (I now realize) I was wrong. They did not befriend me in order to change me but I was changed through their friendship—and they were changed too. What an extraordinary grace.

One of my prayers for your congregation is that it would be known, at once, for its relentless pursuit of justice and for its insistence on loving folks even when they are wrong. Our faith calls us to sustain these tensions. God has not given up on any of our neighbors—not even those White Christians who trouble us both so much. Far be it from us to give up on them.

I realize as I come to the end of this letter that in many ways Micah 6:8 says it all. It’s a favorite text in progressive Christian circles but one that we don’t always live into as fully as we might. Let the words fall anew on your spirit:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good,  
And what does the Lord require of you  
But to do justice and to love kindness  
And to walk humbly with your God?”

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

I have every confidence in you and can’t wait to hear how things continue to unfold. It is sure to be a tumultuous few months ahead. Know that, whatever may come, I will be holding you all in prayer.

Heath