

Exercising the Powers of the Weak:
A Progressive Christian's Response to White Christian Nationalism

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this annual meeting of the Vermont Conference. You've given me a big assignment: to describe the dangers of White Christian Nationalism and then suggest ways to respond, all in, say, 40 to 45 minutes. As we plunge in, let's start with a prayer from *The New Century Hymnal*. Let us pray: "Jesus said, 'You ought always to pray and not to faint.' Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger, more faithful disciples. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but for power equal to your tasks. Then, the doing of your work will be no miracle; *you* will be the miracle. Every day you will wonder at yourself and the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."¹ Let the people say, Amen!

Here's the thing: Christianity is a powerful force, *but not always for the good*. That's a sobering realization that we need to sit with and explore. In the U.S., White Christian Nationalism is posing a grave danger to liberal democracy and the rule of law. It seeks to replace democracy with a radical Christian theocracy that would establish White patriarchal control of government, church and society, and family. It threatens to put an abrupt stop to decades of efforts to create a more just society, a more peaceful world, and a more robustly protected planet. Those claiming to follow Jesus are doing great harm. How should those of us who identify as progressive Christians respond?

If only I had the *definitive* answer to that question, but, alas, I don't. In due course, I'll suggest some actions that I believe will make a difference, and during the Q/A time to follow, I hope you'll share your own best thinking. More than ever, we need to pool our moral wisdom. I should also confess that I can't even offer assurances that we'll survive this mess. Unless we've lived in other parts of the world, none of us has first-hand experience of living in an authoritarian regime or dealing directly with fascism, so it's not surprising that many, perhaps even most of us, are not feeling adequately prepared to confront our real-world crisis: the organized assault on U.S. democracy and the sobering fact that in the 2024 election the enemies of democracy employed democratic means to turn democracy against itself.

There's something in particular that this gathered community should find deeply troubling. It is White Christians who have brought this nation to the brink of authoritarianism. As journalist and ex-evangelical Chrissy Stroop puts it, "White Christian churches have become the *incubators* of authoritarian politics."² Conservative White Christian evangelicals are the base for the MAGA movement. True enough, but not evangelicals alone. In 2016 a *majority* of white

¹ "Prayers of Benediction" #875, *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).

² Chrissy Stroop, "Christian Nationalism Is Authentically Christian – and According to a New Poll Most White Evangelicals Are Supporters," *Religion Dispatches*, February 9, 2023.

Christians – 81% of white evangelicals, 60% of white Protestants, and 60% of white Catholics – voted to put a white racist in the White House, the guy who used birtherism to jump start his Presidential campaign and denounced immigrants at the southern border as criminals, rapists, and murderers. In 2020, despite Trump’s mishandling of the COVID pandemic and all the chaos and scandals of his Administration, *even greater* numbers of white Christians voted a second time to keep him in the White House.

About the November 2024 election, Robert Jones, president of the Public Religion Research Institute, has shared this: “I’m still shaken,” he writes, “by the fact that *most* white Christians—evangelicals, mainline, and Catholic—voted to usher in the regime that has thrown the switch that is propelling us rapidly down a track that leads to authoritarianism and fascism.” Is all then lost? No, Jones argues, because he believes that “the path back toward a pluralistic democracy remains in view. But,” he acknowledges, “*I am worried* – because that future is contingent on white Americans developing [two things: first, a moral] consciousness that rejects the pull of the old siren songs [of white supremacy, misogyny, and xenophobia] and, [second, on our developing] a courage to act that has yet to collectively appear.”³ Without vision and courage, the people are at serious risk.

Christian nationalism is best described as “a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge Christian and American identities. It heavily relies upon the mythological founding of the United States as a ‘Christian nation,’ singled out for God’s special favor.”⁴ At the heart of Christian nationalism is the anti-democratic notion that America is a Christian nation for the benefit of Christians alone. The organization Christians Against Christian Nationalism describes the danger this way: “Christian nationalism undergirds a number of threats to religious freedom, including anti-Muslim bigotry, antisemitism, and government-sponsored religion.” It gives permission for “discrimination and at times violence against religious minorities and the non-religious.” It mistakenly invokes the principle of religious liberty “as a rationale for circumventing laws and regulations aimed at protecting a pluralistic democracy, such as nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people, women, and religious minorities.” Amanda Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty puts it plainly: “The single biggest threat to religious freedom in the United States today is Christian nationalism,” which shows up in different ways, “some more obviously harmful than others. The most violent expressions, such as what we saw at the January 6 insurrection, get most of the attention. But the more subtle ones – like state legislative efforts to promote the teaching of the Bible in public schools or to require the posting of ‘In God We Trust’ in public spaces – are also dangerous in that they perpetuate the false narrative that to be a true American one must be Christian – and often a *certain type* of Christian.”⁵

Who belongs to this movement? According to research jointly conducted by the Brookings Institute and PRRI, 10% of Americans are strong adherents of White Christian Nationalism, and another 19% are sympathizers, so all told, we’re talking about roughly one-third of the U.S. population. In contrast, 30% of Americans strongly reject this political

³ Robert P. Jones, “MAGA’s DEI Logic,” #*WhiteTooLong* Newsletter, February 14, 2025.

⁴ “Christian Nationalism Is ‘Single Biggest Threat’ to America’s Religious Freedom,” *Center for American Progress*, April 13, 2022.

⁵ *Ibid.*

movement while another 40% are skeptical. The good news here? Two-thirds of Americans oppose or have doubts about White Christian Nationalism. A good case can be made, then, for focusing our efforts on strengthening this broad two-thirds majority. We can do so by joining the resisters ourselves if we're not there already, and we can also encourage more of the skeptical to step up.

A related question is, how strong is this movement? Consider a few chilling facts. Over half of Republicans hold Christian nationalist beliefs. That's true also for two-thirds of White Evangelical Protestants. Adherents of White Christian Nationalism are nearly seven times more likely than rejecters of White Christian Nationalism to believe that "True patriots might have to resort to violence to save our country." Finally, a majority of Christian Nationalists deny that white supremacy is a major problem in the U.S. In fact, most reject the idea that past injustices contribute in any way to present-day hurdles for Black Americans.⁶

It's not a stretch to say that Christian Nationalists promote *White* supremacy alongside *Christian* supremacy. The two are deeply intertwined. First, there's the claim that America was founded by and for White European Christians. A second claim follows, that the future of this nation depends on White Christian men exercising political control and cultural dominance. As historian Heather Cox Richardson explains, "MAGA Christian nationalists reject the principles of democracy. They claim that the equal rights central to democracy *undermine* nations by treating women and racial, religious, and gender minorities as *equal to* white Christian men. They want to see an end to the immigration that they believe weakens a nation, and [they expect] government to reinforce traditional religious and patriarchal values."⁷ A representative of this worldview, Darren Beattie, a Trump appointed official at the State Department, bluntly stated what he regards as obvious: "Competent white men," he announced, "*must* be in charge if you want things to work. Unfortunately," he complained, "our entire national ideology is predicated on coddling the feelings of women and minorities and demoralizing competent white men."⁸ Another MAGA supporter offered a similar explanation for why he sticks with Trump: "I like the fact that he's an alpha male. There's no doubt that he's an alpha male. We need an alpha in charge."⁹

Why do White Christian Nationalists support Strongman rule? Because it's *a means to maintain white racial dominance* and white Christian dominance. Many white people hold tightly onto whiteness as a prized marker of social superiority, and yet, at the very same time, they seem "haunted by a deep malaise that begs to know, 'Who *are* you if you have no one to be better than?'"¹⁰ Tragically, this fear of equality feeds racial and cultural resentments, which can morph into blind fury directed at perceived threats. Thomas Edsall describes the plight of less educated, more rural, and more economically vulnerable white Americans this way: They resent being "left behind," unseen and unimportant, and they feel as if they have "become 'strangers in

⁶ PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) and the Brookings Institute, "Findings from the 15th Annual Survey of American Values, 2024.

⁷ Heather Cox Richardson, *Letter from an American*, February 16, 2025.

⁸ Darren Beattie, quoted in Robert P. Jones, "MAGA's DEI Logic," *#WhiteTooLong Newsletter*, February 14, 2025.

⁹ Dylan Tusinski, Hannah Kaufman, and Joe Carpenter, "'So far, so good': President's supporters in Maine like what they see," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 30, 2025, A8.

¹⁰ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 183.

their own land.’ They see themselves as victims of affirmative action and betrayed by ‘line-cutters’ – African Americans, immigrants, refugees, and women – who jump ahead of them in the queue for the American dream. [And] they resent liberal intellectuals who tell them to feel sorry for the line-cutters and [then] dismiss them as bigots when they don’t.”¹¹

For many white people, *social equality is a frightening prospect*, especially in relation to immigrants, people of color, and others designated as culturally inferior. To them, *social equality signals loss*: the loss of preferred status and a shameful kind of demotion, especially if you feel entitled to a disproportionate share of power, resources, and deferential treatment as your God-given right. This land, after all, is *their* land, and they bristle at being told they’re obligated to share it with the undeserving. So, what’s the upshot of this? While, yes, they could revitalize their communities by welcoming social and cultural difference, instead they become even more socially isolated within segregated white enclaves. While, yes, they could direct their anger at an extractive, exploitative capitalist system that has shattered their personal sense of dignity and robbed them, their families, and their communities of any semblance of financial security, instead they beat up on themselves or, more likely, scapegoat other vulnerable groups as the source of their problems. Economic inequality and social isolation are killing both their bodies and their spirits.

The MAGA movement promotes a truncated notion of “We, the people.” Outsiders are viewed as dangerous, including Blacks in big cities, Mexican and Central American refugees at the border, immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, drag queens at children’s story hours, and transgender athletes and military personnel. By insisting on “White Christian America first,” Trump and the MAGA movement have signaled their preferential option: the protection and privileging of all things white, male, cisgender, Christian, and uber-wealthy. Accordingly, the autocrat aggressively pursues a “politics of restoration,” disrupting and dismantling the cultural gains made over many decades by women, people of color, and the LBGTQ+ community. Reversing *Roe v. Wade* and taking away a Constitutionally protected right that had been in place for fifty years was only the beginning. The goal is to *return* white men to power *as if* white men have not been in power all along.

Recall the harsh rebukes of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives from the start of the Trump 2.0 administration. The President of the United States blamed DEI for the January plane crash on the Potomac River that killed 67 people, including the crew of a military helicopter. Elon Musk blamed DEI for the California wildfires. The Missouri State Attorney General has sued Starbucks because he complains that their workforce has become too woke, that is, “more female and less white,” and, therefore, presumably less reliable and less productive. Such White supremacist and misogynistic assertions are spewed out as if they are self-evident truths, requiring no evidence to back them up.¹² The autocrat’s strategy here is to seize the narrative, keep repeating a distorted view of reality, and follow the bully’s playbook of

¹¹ Thomas B. Edsall, “The Peculiar Populism of Donald Trump,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2017. Here Edsall is building on Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016).

¹² Jones, “MAGA’s DEI Logic.”

blame and division by “point[ing] to a group of people who don’t look like you and tell[ing] you to blame them for your problems.”¹³

This broad attack on DEI is not random. Rather, it’s the most recent iteration of a longstanding campaign to discredit human and civil rights and roll back the social, political, legal, and economic gains that people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people have won over the past decades. As Jamelle Bouie argues, Trump and the MAGA movement *by design* are standing on the wrong side of history. “They seek to arrest and reverse the historical march toward inclusion and social justice, and they do so by inscribing old patterns of privilege and subordination. They [seek to revitalize] the worst hierarchies our society has produced, and [sad to say,] those hierarchies will [then] shape how ordinary people view their own position and potential allegiances.” A strongly egalitarian, pro-democracy movement is needed to challenge rising fascism, but Bouie offers a word of warning. “We should remember,” he cautions, “that it was not all that easy to build solidarity under Jim Crow.”¹⁴

Building solidarity across the color line has always been challenging, but these days many people of color find little reason to trust that White America is actually committed to securing an inclusive, multi-racial, and multi-faith democracy. As journalist Joy Reid explains, Black people “keep trying to lead this country toward a more perfect union,” but “white people keep saying no. [White people] keep saying we want the devil because the devil will protect our supremacy. And our supremacy matters to us much more than even our own economic survival. Our supremacy is central to who we are as Americans. We need to be the central characters in the American story. And we want that so badly that we’re willing to punch ourselves in the face economically. . . . We’re willing to lose our livelihoods, our jobs, our businesses, our farms, our whole lives—and including maybe our physical lives—to protect our supremacy. . . . We [Black folks] don’t trust y’all to not elect the guy his own VP called ‘maybe Hitler.’ If y’all are going to elect ‘maybe Hitler,’ we don’t trust you.”¹⁵

“*We don’t trust you.*” Sit with that. It is white Christians who have, by and large, created this mess. We’re the ones who must heal the broken trust. The burden is on us to prove that we’re no longer a danger to democracy, an obstacle to justice, or a threat to this planet. Given the challenges ahead, we’ll need the strength of our best convictions. Given our compromised moral track record, we’ll also need the wisdom and humility not to go it alone. Given the dangers of White Christian Nationalism, *what then shall we do?* How might we challenge this authoritarian regime and help return this nation to sanity and stability? What difference can those of us without great wealth, power, or military might, possibly make?

For myself, I wager that there’s only one way to defeat authoritarianism: by standing in solidarity with others, maintaining an unflinching commitment to the common good, and doing the hard work of rebuilding communities grounded in justice, mutual respect, and mutual care, leaving no one out. I appreciate what Barbara Erhenreich’s son said after his activist mother died. Ben concluded her obituary by writing, “She was never one for ‘thoughts and prayers,’ so to honor her, love one another and fight like hell.” That preaches. We won’t meet this moment

¹³ Robert Hubbell, “How to Make Enemies and Repel People,” *Today’s Edition Newsletter*, February 24, 2025.

¹⁴ Jamelle Bouie, “Trump Is on the Wrong Side of History by Design,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2025, SR 3.

¹⁵ “Joy Reid on Black America’s Resistance Reluctance,” *The Ink*, April 8, 2025.

by merely trying to *think* our way through it, but only by our actions, by what we decide to do together. To make a difference, we must speak the truth and speak it plainly. We need to stop naming our national crisis as if it's somehow a matter of "polarization" or "division." That's far too vague and abstract. Our national crisis has come about because of the well-organized, well-funded rise of Christo-fascism. The necessary response to Christo-fascism is to take a side, act courageously, and, yes, "fight like hell."

Our work is, indeed, cut out for us. One of the obstacles we'll need to confront along the way lies within us. Theologian Carter Heyward is helpful on this score by speaking forthrightly about the power of sin. As she argues in *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action*, the sins that have infected White Power Christians are, to a greater or lesser degree, also sins of our own: the sins of the human soul -- the desire for power over others, the presumption of entitlement, and the tolerance for violence -- and the sins of American history, including white supremacy, misogyny, economic injustice, and the degradation of the earth. We must stay forever alert to the ways we, too, participate in, and benefit from, systemic injustice and own up to how often we, too, have failed to love ourselves and others as each deserves to be loved and cared for.¹⁶

At the same time, we need to boldly claim our freedom to teach, preach, and embody the kind of spirituality that sparks a deep desire for justice and compassion in all things, a willingness to make amends as needed, and the determination to do our best to set things right. In the words of Bishop William Barber of the Forward Together/Moral Monday movement, making a difference requires us to hold onto "dangerous memories": not only the memories of collective suffering and the injustices that have been visited on so many, *but also* the memories of collective resistance and the power of alternative visions that have compelled so many before us to seek a more just and humane world.¹⁷

I keep thinking of Chrissy Stroop's observation that conservative White Christianity has become an incubator for authoritarianism, so today we should ask, how might *the Vermont Conference* become an *incubator for justice and freedom*? How might we contribute to building up a multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-faith society whose strength lies in how well the very old and the very young, how well immigrants and refugees, how well Indigenous people and others without power and status are fed, housed, educated, protected, cared for, and respected?

Along these lines, I find myself inspired by the life and wisdom of John Lewis, the late U.S. Congressman and civil rights leader. In his autobiography Lewis tells the story of a summer afternoon in Georgia when he was four or five years old. He writes, "About fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed off in the distance, and suddenly," he recalls, "I was terrified. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside."

¹⁶ Carter Heyward, *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism a Call to Action* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

¹⁷ Rev. William J. Barber II, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

“Her house was not the biggest place around,” Lewis explains, “and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it. That was when Aunt Seneva told us to grasp hands. ‘Line up and hold hands,’ she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk *as a group* toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift. And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

“More than half a century has passed since that day,” John Lewis writes, “and it has struck me more than once, these many years, that our society is not unlike the children in that house: rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart. It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams – so many tensions, so many storms. *But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together, and they did the best they could, grasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.*”¹⁸ Lewis cautions us to be realistic about the fact that the moral project is never ending. “We knew another storm would come,” he admitted, so over the long haul, we must be prepared, time and time again, to show up, connect with others, and stay in the struggle.

To stay *in* the struggle, we must first *be* in the struggle. The problem here, especially for those of us nurtured in the white Christian tradition, is that we’ve been socialized to fear and avoid conflict, to prefer conversation over confrontation, and to prioritize personal transformation over political engagement and communal struggle. Many of us are skittish about power. We’re wary of making waves or causing trouble. We hesitate to take sides. Consequently, we risk falling into what’s called the “neutrality trap,” believing that it’s better to stand apart from the fray while helping others arbitrate their differences and settle their disputes amicably.¹⁹

I’m persuaded that our spiritual work, at this moment, is not to keep the peace or somehow build bridges to win over White Power Christians. While, yes, we should respect MAGA Christians as fellow human beings and not wish them harm, at the same time we’re under *no* obligation to respect their hateful politics or tolerate their callous violations of others.

¹⁸ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1998), “Prologue,” pp. xv-xvii.

¹⁹ Bernard Mayer and Jacqueline N. Font-Guzman, *The Neutrality Trap: Disrupting and Connecting for Social Change* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2022).

The gospel reminds us that when people’s ears are closed and the gospel message is not received, then it’s best to shake the dust off one’s sandals and move on (Matthew 10:14).

But where to move to? In many ways, we’re called to remain *in place*, doing what communities of faith already do: worship, pray, offer comfort to those in pain and grief, and bind up as many wounds as possible. We’re not being called at this moment to do different work, but rather to do our work *differently*, to do ministry *differently*: with a heightened awareness of those among us who are the most vulnerable *and* with a heightened sense of accountability *to them* for how we use our relative power and influence. We need to keep asking, what does ministry require of us *in the context of authoritarianism*? What does faithful, effective *resistance* look like?

Truthful naming is a good starting point. Our national crisis is political and economic, but it’s also moral and spiritual, which places matters squarely within our wheelhouse. Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has identified rampant loneliness and disconnection as a national health emergency, further compounded by a rapacious capitalist system that runs roughshod over people, communities, and the environment. As Murthy points out, there’s a strong connection between loneliness and the rise of authoritarianism. “Our relationships with one another,” he explains, “are a critical part of how we root ourselves in the world and how we buffer against stress and adversity in our lives. And when we don’t have that connection, we’re more deeply impacted by uncertainty and adversity around us, and we feel more threatened. In that state, we’re more likely to be impacted by forces that would polarize society, that would compel us to take extreme action in the face of that threat.”²⁰

How do we name this perilous moment? “Yes, there are *material* concerns that people have in their lives around the economy, around safety, around other challenges like the housing crisis, but there is [*also*] a *deep spiritual crisis*, marked by people feeling a greater sense of disconnection from one another, feeling unmoored or disconnected from sources of meaning and purpose in their lives.” “Policy matters,” Murthy argues, “but policy alone is not enough to address the deeper pain in people’s lives. We’ve got to listen and address both the pragmatic *and* the deeper emotional spiritual crisis that people are going through right now. Otherwise, we leave people feeling like we’re not seeing them, not hearing them, not understanding what’s really going on in their lives. So many people feel like *they’re not seen*.” When people are in pain, Murthy reminds us, our response should be empathy. “We need to respond to that pain in a way that brings people in, not pushes them out. Our failure to show empathy leads to more and more people feeling lonely, isolated, invisible, and resentful.”²¹

What then should we do? I suggest a two-part response. First, as care givers, we’re called to notice, see each other, and do what feminist theologian Nelle Morton described as “hearing one another into speech.” We need to extend empathy to those who are struggling, ourselves included. Things are falling apart; fear abounds. As W.H. Auden wrote, we must connect or die. Otherwise said, we’re called to build up *resilient persons* by strengthening our relational connections, from the most intimate to the most distant.

²⁰ Vivek Murthy, M.D., “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,” *The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, 2023.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Second, as justice lovers, we're also called to build up *resilient communities*. In these difficult times, we must risk becoming *more political* rather than less political. That means directly engaging in *movement building*, as messy as it may be, by joining with others -- largely *outside* the church -- in an ever expanding, broadly inclusive, multi-racial, multi-faith, and socially diverse justice movement, grounded in respect for the earth and committed to the dignity and well-being of all peoples.

Our sacred calling is to be and do church. Day in and day out, that means practicing how to live in community *as equals*. As the hymn puts it, "Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still." *But here's the rub*: Many, if not most white people associated with Christianity, including white liberal Christianity, have been taught to fear difference and avoid flesh-and-blood contact with people "not like them," especially when it comes to race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. (I trust you know what I'm talking about!) However, when we lack real-life connection with others and to whatever causes them pain and joy, we fail to comprehend the real world. Out of touch with others, we risk losing touch with our own pain *as well as* with the joy that comes from resisting injustice.

Not only does the Gospel invite us to stand with those *most unlike* us; we're called to embrace our own increased marginality which will surely follow -- and to receive it as a blessing. In her groundbreaking book *From Margin to Center*, philosopher Bell Hooks points out how marginality is often viewed in terms of loss, deprivation, and diminishment. There's truth to that. Yet, from another angle, marginality can be viewed as a gift, as a zone of freedom, a space in which to experiment with new ways of being and, to use our earlier metaphor, to try out creative strategies for becoming "incubators of justice and compassion."²²

The way forward is fraught. Many dangers lie ahead. Uncertainty abounds. If we're to find our way, much will be required of us, including our listening to, and learning from, those on the margins, those we've been encouraged to avoid. Social justice Christianity invites us to leave our comfort zones, show up in unfamiliar places, and make unexpected connections. Listening respectfully to marginalized persons is a necessary step, but by itself that's not enough. Solidarity is needed, standing shoulder to shoulder and pledging to rebuild community together, not with us taking charge, not with us insisting on our own way, but with us learning how to be respectful allies while being transformed in the process.

Some forty-five years ago, Elizabeth Janeway spoke about movement building and advised against imitating autocrats or trying to mimic how they wield power by bullying, intimidating, and instilling fear. Instead, she urged us to model *an alternative way* by utilizing what she called the distinctive "powers of the weak."²³ I would call these powers the Christic power of justice-love. The first is the power to "come together," the power to clasp hands and use the collective weight of our small bodies to settle the house. Love calls us to mobilize a comprehensive justice movement at the grassroots. The second is the "power of disbelief," the readiness to question the way things are. A justice-loving faith says, "No, the world is not as it should be," and "Yes, change is possible." Furthermore, *we* -- you and I, leaning in with the weight of *our* small bodies -- can contribute to making that change happen.

²² Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

²³ Elizabeth Janeway, *The Powers of the Weak* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

Beyond the two powers that Janeway identified, I'd add a third: the power of *coming out*. Here, let's enlarge the notion of coming out beyond the public declaration of one's gender or sexual identity, as important and life-affirming as this has been for many, myself included. The "coming out" that I have in mind is about embodying our values *out* in the world – and *shamelessly so*. As the old saying goes, closets are for clothes, not for hiding values behind closed doors. Boldly declare your commitments: "No, we're not White Christian Nationalists. There's another way to be Christian. We're social justice Christians." Coming out means laying claim to *our wild, passionate desire* to live alongside others *as co-equals* -- and refusing to settle for less. Coming out means casting our lot with the Other -- the racialized, sexualized, and otherwise demeaned Other -- and standing publicly against white supremacy, gender supremacy, wealth supremacy, and, yes, against Christian supremacy. Coming out also means coming *into* a beloved community, finding new life among unexpected friends, and sharing our power and resources to benefit the common good.

Autocrats create chaos and sow division by throwing us off balance, by making us afraid, and by breeding cynicism. Autocrats want us to despair that moral, political, and spiritual change is neither possible nor desirable. So, too, they encourage us to accept imperial Christianity's false claim that somehow, only a Strong Man, only a force beyond ourselves, can save us. To the contrary, social justice Christianity is grounded in the radical belief that only a vulnerable, compassionate God can help us, the Holy One who continues to dwell among us -- *not* to overpower us, but to *connect* us, in all our frailty and in all our strengths. The mystery of faith is that when we clasp hands with others, "walk with the wind," and use the weight of "our small bodies" to *make justice real*, lo and behold, we stand to discover true *spiritual power* along with deep, deep joy.

But what about hope? The fourth century theologian Augustine of Hippo reminded the faith community that "hope has two beautiful children, anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to change things as needed." This is my hope and prayer, that we'll be blessed with enough prophetic anger and steadfast courage, with enough moral vision and trustworthy friends, so that when the winds rage all around, we will not run away, but rather stay in the house, clasp each other's hands, and move together toward the corner of the house that is the weakest. Whenever we gather our courage to walk together into the wind, God will be there ahead of us, waiting for us to show up. Thanks be to God.