

Fill Your Mug, Responsibly

I've just finished the third class toward my Doctor of Ministry degree. It's been really good to be back in the classroom learning from and with others. It's also a little harder than it was when I started seminary ten years ago. Maybe because I'm leaving my 40s, maybe because I'm in perimenopause. Maybe it's because I am working toward a project and dissertation, not only a degree. But, despite that, it's been exciting to scratch my academic itch.

And the work—I'm creating a faith formation program for all ages that helps the individual answer their questions about faith—feels important, even urgent. I have this feeling that many of us are afraid to be Christian. We are timid about claiming Jesus as our Lord because, well, so many people are doing that in ways that feel and are un-Christlike. If we call ourselves Jesus followers, if we say we are religious or devout—even if we only say it to ourselves or trusted church friends—what will people think? Will they think that we are America-first-and-only Christians? Will they think that we are anti-trans? Will they think we are anti-immigrant?

These are serious questions. Seminal research on Christian nationalism by authors Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, published in their book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, shows that Christian nationalism is more closely correlated with anti-immigration, anti-trans, racist, and patriarchal (to name a few) ideologies than it is with “religiosity.” They show that Christian nationalists coalesce around ideas about what it means to be an American and who is welcome to be an American more than they do around Christian faith. So, while many of us think there are certain denominations or ideological groups of Christians who are Christian nationalists, the fact is that Christian nationalism is not a denomination, but a worldview that shows up in many different churches.

They write: “We have also seen that while Christian nationalism is most prevalent among white Christians, and specifically white evangelicals, the two are not synonymous and conflating the two is unnecessarily misleading.”

They add: “To illustrate, let's return to three political issues that were powerfully associated with Christian nationalism. As Americans show greater agreement with Christian nationalism, they are more likely to view Muslim refugees as terrorist threats, agree that citizens should be made to show respect for America's traditions, and oppose stricter gun control laws. But as Americans become more religious in terms of attendance, prayer, and Scripture reading, they move in the opposite direction on these issues. These

situations are not anomalous. In fact, the crisscrossing pattern we observe here holds true for other political issues.”

And so I wonder, with a kind of nationalist ideology that puts on Christian-themed features, have those of us who disagree with all or some of the ideas that are part of the Christian nationalist’s beliefs decided that it’s uncomfortable to be Christian?

Because I think now is not the time for diverse Christian voices to back away from claiming Christ as their Lord. It seems to me now is the time to proclaim it more loudly. Love your neighbor out loud, visibly. Accept and welcome LGBTQ+ people and perspectives because of Christ. Defend the immigrant because of the Gospel. Identify with the Beatitudes which are the words of Christ proclaiming good news and preference for the downtrodden. Maybe now is the time to really ask ourselves, “Who do I think Christ is? What do I tell myself about my deepest faith beliefs? How can I fight to joyfully claim Christ as my own Lord, my own brother, my own teacher, the son of God?”

When I work with people around matters of faith, I use four words to describe my approach to questions of interpretation of the Bible, questions of faith practices, questions of mission and outreach, of theology, of worship. These words you may have heard me say before: Meaningful, Useful, Good, and Responsible. Someone in a new member class suggested the shorthand MUGGER. But I think we can see the problem with that. So, I have begun to think of my process as a way to fill my mug of faith. To answer the questions I have about God’s way in the world meaningfully, usefully, with goodness as my aim, and responsibly.

What I’m asking you, as congregants who take their faith seriously, is will you share a mug with me? Can we talk? Can we pray together? Can we learn to take hold of our love of Christ in a way that shows the world what it means when we sing, “You will know we are Christians by our love!” (Not our politics).

In deepest faith in the way of Christ,

Pastor Nikki