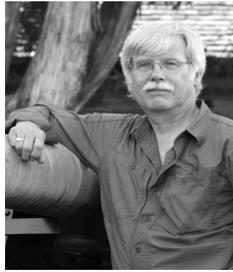


We have been here before

COMMENTARY — David Skidmore



We have a problem. Or rather we continue to have a problem, one made plain in the torch-lit parade of Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and white nationalists—aka the alt-right—and their wannabes in Charlottesville, Va. in August; and punctuated by the backlash against

removing Confederate monuments from public places.

Put simply, we who are white Americans in large part are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the persistent prejudice embedded in our institutions, and in our hearts, against people of color, particularly African-American, and against Jews and Muslims. And we are in denial regarding the subtle persecution they face on a nearly daily basis.

The chilling chants from the parade: “The Jews will not replace us.”, and “Blood and soil.”, seem like a soundtrack from the 1930s, but they are very much part of the backbeat today in the debate over our national vision. Whatever gains were achieved during the civil rights efforts of the 1960s seem less certain in the wake of efforts to undermine voting rights, and to destabilize the economic base of minority communities. This is not the path to greatness for America, regardless of what supporters of the current president think.

We are supposedly in an awakening populist movement, but this is not the populism of the northern and southern farmer alliances of the late 1880s. This is a reawakening of nativism infused with bigotry and race-based resentment that is targeting immigration and affirmative action, two programs that embody the principles enshrined in our Declaration and Constitution (equal protection clause).

We have been here before: the Know Nothing party of the 1850s railing against German and Irish Catholic immigrants, the Immigration Restriction League of the 1890s; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; and the German American Bund and the America First Committee of the 1930s and 1941. Then and now, fear was the catalyst. White Protestant nationalists feared the loss of power and privilege, misconstruing the American experiment as a zero-sum game. Fear married to greed fueled judicial decisions and legislation (Dred Scott, Indian Removal Act) that led to such tragedies as the Trail of Tears, and deepened the divisions that made the Civil War all but inevitable.

Now we have a president who has hung Andrew Jackson’s portrait in the Oval Office, praising Old Hickory as

a model populist president, and claiming Jackson could have prevented the Civil War (Jackson, a slave owner, died in 1845); ignoring Jackson’s pro-slavery stance, and his forced relocation of Cherokees and other eastern tribes to Indian Territory in the Plains (15,000 died of the 100,000 deported).

People are pushing back against this nativist and racist sentiment, notably through alliances and movements like Indivisible and Black Lives Matter, but also through faith groups and congregations, including The Episcopal Church. Bishops across the church have denounced the sentiments and actions of the alt-right, and individual churches are addressing the legacy of racism within their own walls, including Washington National Cathedral which recently decided to remove stained glass commemorating Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson (donated by the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1953).

Although unlikely, a national conversation and confession, along the lines of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, would help repair the wounds of over 400 years of racism. We can be encouraged that the conversation is now happening in the Episcopal Church, led by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, most recently at Christ Episcopal Church in Charlottesville.

“The bitter, painful reality of what we have called and known to be racism, which never went away, was like a scab was ripped off Aug. 12, and the whole country saw it,” Curry told the group of more than 100 at Christ Church Sept. 7, as reported by Episcopal News Service.

Home to the University of Virginia, Charlottesville is also home to three Episcopal parishes, the oldest being Christ Church. St. Paul’s Memorial Church, adjacent to the university, followed in 1910, and nine years later, African American congregants, feeling unwelcome at Christ Church, founded Trinity Church in the Vineyard Hills neighborhood. While St. Paul’s and Trinity became partners in desegregation and anti-discrimination work in the 1950s and ‘60s, Christ Church kept its distance well into the current century. Under the current rector, the Rev. Paul Walker, Christ Church and Trinity members have begun reconciliation efforts, beginning with a joint celebration of Absalom Jones, the first black Episcopal priest, in 2014. Last fall, members of both congregations attended a workshop on racial reconciliation.

This is the way forward: talking, listening, and experiencing discipleship together. It is hard but necessary work, and the only path that will lead us to the Kingdom.