

## **STAND UP FOR TRUTH AND REALITY!**

Handout 4 of 4 12/17/17

### **Helping Restore a Strong Truth/Reality-Based Majority in America**

The Rev. Keith Thompson, former pastor of First United Methodist Church, Boulder, Colorado

#### **IV. The Essential Roles of Faith and Repentance for Communal Social Justice Action**

The Issue: Why is it so difficult for American communities, religious and secular, at the local level to develop and sustain healthy, effective ways to promote social justice?

\*Primary Resource: (D) *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* by Jennifer M. McBride (2012)

##### **(1) Repent? Us? We're Not the Ones Responsible for this Threat to Our Democracy.**

One vital question for those of us who want to resist the threat to our democracy from all those who, knowingly or unknowingly, are promoting a "post truth" and "alternative facts" world is: **How can we develop and sustain an effective social resistance movement** rather than just relying upon sporadic protests by isolated individuals and small groups?

In 2012 Jennifer McBride wrote a book specifically designed to address that question for Christian social justice activists. *(D, above) (I had the opportunity to meet her in 2014 and discuss her penetrating insights.)* While her book deals primarily with the Christian Church's identity and mission in society, I would argue that it is relevant for any faith community, secular or religious.

She relies heavily on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology. He was one of the most important Christian theologians of the 20th century and a martyr to Nazi tyranny. During the 1930s, he was a prominent leader in the resistance to the Nazi takeover of the German church. Even though the nature and context of the resistance movement we need to develop today is different, he has much to teach us. *(Full disclosure--Bonhoeffer is one of the most important influences on my thinking and values.)*

It may surprise you that **McBride considers "repentance" to be the foundation of all social justice activism in the Christian Church** *(and probably even more surprising that, for me, this is true for all religious and secular faith communities)*. She explains: repentance needs to be understood as this-worldly, communal and political rather than otherworldly, individualistic and apolitical as is so common. Repentance is also not just about admitting guilt in the narrow sense. For McBride, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the 20th-century Jewish prophetic activist, said it best, "few are guilty, but all are responsible." We all bear some responsibility for evil in the world, **and our repentance for this must not only be spoken but "embodied and enacted,"** individually and communally. This is absolutely necessary for any justice activism that is as humble as it is bold. As she sums up: *"an ecclesial mode of being in the world, encompassing both act and speech...provides the church with an ethical framework for social and political engagement."* (D, pp. 8-10, 17)

##### **(2) Of What, Specifically, Do Liberals/Progressives Need to Repent?**

With respect to the current threat to the very existence of our democracy, Handouts #2 and #3 have already revealed some of the things of which American Liberals/Progressives, both religious and secular, should repent. Kurt Andersen showed us how since the 1960s **we have contributed to the relativization of truth and the huge growth in the percentage of the population that believes in fantasy and conspiracy theories, openly denying demonstrable facts.** Edward Luce helped us see how over the last three decades **we have neglected those in the middle and**

Note: For PDFs of all the handouts see <http://www.centristfaithandpolitics.com/610-thompson-2017.html>. The discussion of this handout will be 12/17/17, 12:00-1:00 pm, First United Methodist Church, Boulder, CO.

*(See next page for back of handout)*

**lower classes who were “left behind” economically and how we, from our more highly educated position, failed to treat them with respect.** (*I personally confess these things.*) McBride’s contribution is to help us see and accept some of the assumptions underlying these failings that must be dealt with, if we want to develop and sustain a movement to protect our democracy today.

With respect to Christianity, McBride critiques both evangelicals/fundamentalists on the right and liberals/progressives on the left using her “confession unto repentance” principle. First, she is critical of both: “*Protestants in the United States risk understanding themselves as--and often communicate to others that they think they are--specially favored when they interpret Christian faith as the possession of right knowledge and/or right morality...offering little more than an invitation to become like us--to think like us and act like us.*” **This denies that “the church exists for others. It exists to participate in healing of this world.”** (D, p. 25, my emphasis)

While McBride strongly criticizes right-wing Christianity, our focus here is on the penetrating things she has to say about Liberal/Progressive churches. They tend “to offer a witness that reflects a general sense of God’s love and acceptance, not one that reflects a God who is known in a particular way through the person and work of Christ...they maintain openness to other religions by describing their commitment to Christianity in terms of preference and practicality...[faith is] **valued primarily as a vehicle for self-actualization**...attention to individual spiritual expression often eclipses a robust account of divine judgment and the cost of Christian discipleship.” They “**have acted primarily as stewards of civil society, thus shaping and upholding the status quo...manifesting a religion of ethics... [with] its innocuous volunteerism...[it] introduces a minority of Christians in a local body to the sufferings of the world without penetrating the comfortable lifestyle and self-interest of the church as a whole...the top priority of the church is the congregants’ spiritual well-being...[it] rarely enacts a particularly Christian, transformative public witness that communicates Christ’s being for others.**” (D, pp. 31-32, 50-51, my emphasis) Given her evaluation, it’s easy to see why left-wing Protestant Christianity (*and I would argue other religious and secular left wing faiths*) find it hard to develop and sustain social resistance movements.

### **(3) Resist What? How? and With Whom? (Oh, You Don’t Mean With Them, Do You?)**

While there are many dimensions to the threat we face, in this series we are focusing on those related to the assaults on truth and reality. Our other key resource (^D1, below) is a brand new book of short essays by 25 contributors of many races and faiths, including a Jew, a Muslim, Roman Catholics and an ex-evangelical. From the Forward by Jim Wallis: “The Trump era clearly promises to be dangerous to many people in our country: to many of our core values and institutions, to our governmental balance of powers, to the rule of law, to a free and honest press, and, seemingly, to truth itself...truth must overcome ‘alternative facts’ in all of our social media...we confront both a danger and an opportunity... [we must] push back against bigotry, protect the vulnerable, preserve our values, stand up for the truth, and keep the faith. We need to live and act in solidarity--together.” In the Preface, Jacqui Lewis whose calling to resist comes from **Jesus whose life “was lived in the context of empire, oppression, and subjugation. His revolution was grounded in a spiritual practice of resistance,**” calls us to join her “**to ‘carefront’ (to confront with care)**” **even those who are quite different from us, even Trump voters, yes, them especially,** to discuss these questions: “1. Whom did you vote for? (2) What did you dream would happen when you cast that vote? (3) How are you feeling now? (4) Is there anything we can do together?” (D1, xviii-xx, xxii, my emphasis)

(See the link on the bottom of the previous page to find additional resources, especially *One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet Deported*, 2017)

^Other Resources: (D1) *Faith And Resistance in the Age of Trump* by Miguel A. De La Torre, editor (2017).