Opinion

News



White nationalists are met by counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, Aug. 12, 2017, during a rally over plans to remove the statue of a Confederate general from a city park. (CNS/Reuters/Joshua Roberts)



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In his homilies on Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent, Pope Francis invites people of faith to join Jesus in fasting and prayer. Regarding the devil's third temptation to make all the kingdoms of the earth his own, Francis said that "the evil one wants to distract Jesus from accomplishing his mission by presenting him a political Messianic perspective."

If we are going to take the risk of walking with Jesus into the desert to hear God's word, I wonder how predominantly white churches will reject a "political Messianic perspective" in a time when we've slid into tyranny, if not messianism?

At the same time, as white religious nationalism drives us into tyranny (if not messianism), the existential threat of climate change is melting and burning the planet right underneath our feet.

Yet, as I worship at local parishes in western Massachusetts, one would not know that there is any existential threat to the planet or our constitutional republic. The homiletic focus on individual salvation strikes me as grotesquely egocentric if not downright blasphemous.

I believe we need to tarry both with record warm water underneath Antarctica *and* the ways racial capitalism extracts wealth from communities of color in a *Race for Profit* while extractive oil and gas industries wreak havoc on the earth and human health.

In his reflections on "The Souls of White Folk" in *Darkwater*, W.E.B. Du Bois warned us: " 'But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?' Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!"

We need God's grace to see ourselves as Du Bois sees us. Concluding his reflection on white souls, Du Bois wrote, "I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, 'I am white!' Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief!"

Du Bois exposes our egomaniacal deceit and violence. If you find your finger pointing at the megalomaniac in the White House, pause and reflect on how he is only symptomatic of a deeper malaise within white culture.



W.E.B. DuBois (National Archives at College Park)

Our cry "I am white!" and our associated cries of innocence only obscure, as Ta Nehisi Coates writes to his son in *Between the World and Me*, how our racism "dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this."

Dear white reader, before you retreat to the safety of self-perceived innocence, stop, quiet yourself and dwell with the ways our African American brothers and sisters see us. Hear Du Bois and Coates: do not look away from our own violence.

Yet, that is precisely what we who believe we are white do: we look away from the problem of violence that is within us. We deny and evade how our way of life destroys the planet. If we do take any time to look at this violence, it is only from the safety of our own comfort zone.

I include myself in these ranks. For too long have I attempted to create a zone of safety where white people might learn how we perpetuate violence against black and brown people and the earth. No matter how much my anti-racism co-facilitators and I attend to the fragility of white people, invariably, white people resort to evading responsibility, denying complicity, claiming innocence and minimizing the multiple ways we hurt others and the planet.

We believe we can have it both ways; that is, we think we can maintain a foundation of the system — white comfort and safety — while we extend forms of charity that may alleviate some pain but not change the systemic relationship between privilege and oppression that burns the planet.

Retrieving Du Bois' insights into the "Souls of White Folk" is a critical way that white people can address our own complicity in racism and environmental degradation. It is a critical way that we may yet resist American political messianism and follow Jesus into the desert.

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I suggest taking up the soulful gift offered by philosopher George Yancy in his essays deliberating on the observation *Look, a White!*. Yancy takes his cue from Franz Fanon's experience of being marked by a white child telling his mother: "Look, a Negro!" The boy continues, " 'Mama, see the Negro, I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened!' "

Fanon expresses his desire to laugh but realizes, "Now they were becoming afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible." The white collective gaze, Fanon sees, made him a hypersexualized, objectified thing of evil and danger.

Abhorrently, we white folks say "Look, a Negro!" every day in where and how we live! We're implicitly if not explicitly saying that when we live in predominantly white neighborhoods, churches and schools.

Our white comfort zone is where we white folks embody anti-black white supremacy. That is the segregated comfort zone where we massage each other with countless deceptions. Our segregated homes, churches, schools and minds are where we fail the confront the real problem: us.

The point is not to wallow in self-pitying or self-loathing. We do need to face reality. We do need to face the temptations of our own fragility and comfort that prevent us from seeing and feeling the pain we cause black people and the planet. We need to recognize where and how we actually live before we might be able to embrace the transformation Jesus calls us to.

It is time that we see how our whiteness prevents us from taking up Jesus admonition: "Whoever seeks to protect [their] life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it (Luke 17:33)." I don't hear Jesus recommending moderation; I hear a call to giving up our attachments and giving our lives for the thriving of black and brown kin and the earth. Then we might yet be able to take up the words of the prophet that we become "repairers of the breach" and "restorers of ruined homesteads (Isaiah 58:12)."

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