



FASPE

Fellowships at
Auschwitz
for the Study of
Professional Ethics

2017 JOURNAL

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FASPE 2017 Medical and Seminary Fellows on the grounds of the House of the Wannsee Conference in Berlin. **KATIE ZONI / FASPE**

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

What does Germany from 1933 to 1945 have to do with today? Wasn't the Holocaust a singular act of malevolence perpetrated by a group of evil and deranged madmen?

What do professionals and the professions have to do with mass murder and genocide?

What do contemporary ethics have to do with Adolf Hitler?

These are the questions that underlie the FASPE mission.

In fact, it *was* the professionals in Germany and portions of occupied Europe who designed and enabled the actions that led to genocide. It *was* the professionals who executed the laws and policies that they designed. Lawyers wrote and enforced the Nuremberg Laws. Doctors designed and carried out the first murders of the handicapped and the opposition. Journalists became propagandists. Business executives used slave labor and entered into contracts with the Nazi regime to produce the weapons of genocide. Pastors and priests too often collaborated and condoned, even promoted, Nazi policies. And, to be sure, their actions were *voluntary*, not carried out at gunpoint.

FASPE begins by studying the *perpetrators*, the professionals who looked like, were educated in the same fashion as, and played the same leadership roles in their society as, today's professionals. How and why did *they* make the transition from ordinary professionals to becoming accessories to or enablers of mass murder? The answer is that it happened day by day, decision by decision, often in the service of ambition and prestige and not ideology.

In FASPE's focus on contemporary ethics in the professions, we do not seek analogies or equivalencies to Nazi Germany. Instead, we seek to display the importance of ethical behavior — even on the “little issues” — and to highlight the leadership role that professionals must play in their communities. We want our professionals to identify ethical issues and to develop tactics to address them.

We hope that the essays in this year's journal display the seriousness with which FASPE Fellows accept their responsibilities. Our Fellows give us reason for optimism as they become ethical leaders in their professions.

On behalf of FASPE, I congratulate the 2017 class of FASPE Fellows and welcome them to our community of over 430 alumni Fellows. We look forward to your leadership.

David Goldman
Chairman

FASPE

FASPE operates fellowship programs for graduate students in professional schools — business, journalism, law, medical and seminary — and early stage practitioners in those professions, which challenge its Fellows to become acutely aware of their responsibilities as respected professionals in their communities and to act in an ethical fashion.

FASPE fellowships are comprised of intense two-week study trips to Germany and Poland where Fellows study the actions and choices of their professional counterparts between 1933 and 1945. Through this examination of the ethical failures of the professions in what was a progressive, modern society, Fellows learn about the critical role that professionals play in society and the consequences of their actions — positive or negative — on the world around them.

FASPE offers a contemporary approach to the study of the Holocaust by focusing on the actions of the perpetrators rather than on the victims. Drawing on the powers of place, the study of history and a rich contextual education, FASPE creates a uniquely effective means for studying professional ethics — well beyond what is achieved by the rules-based approach often seen in the traditional university classroom.

Originally piloted in 2009 and launched in 2010, FASPE marked its eighth year of operation in 2017. A highly competitive program, FASPE accepts only 65 Fellows (12 - 15 in each of the five professions) from nearly 1,000 applications per year. Its faculty is drawn from international Holocaust historians, practicing professionals and leading academics.

FASPE seminars engage Fellows in thinking across several themes, including: defining professionalism; considering a professional's responsibility to the larger society; and the tactics of enacting an ethical decision. Seminars also focus on topics that are discipline specific, such as:

- **Business:** Are there products that simply should not be sold to particular consumers? What are the responsibilities of the C-Suite, or of the corporation, beyond formalistic legal compliance? What are appropriate penalties for corporate wrongdoing?
- **Journalism:** How do journalists balance the costs and benefits of access? What ethical issues arise in political reporting? What challenges arise in fact-checking a victim's story? Does advocacy fit into journalism?

- **Law:** How do attorneys manage duties of candor and confidentiality? What control do lawyers have over decisions that impact a client? Does the duty to a client supersede all other responsibilities?
- **Medical:** What are the ethical issues involved in medical research on human subjects? Should physicians participate in assisted suicide? How should doctors deal with resource limitations in making healthcare decisions?
- **Seminary:** What is the role of religious leaders as ethical, and not just religious, educators? When and how should they address political issues with a congregation? What are the challenges of pastoral care during times of crisis?

FASPE has far-reaching goals. On an individual basis, it seeks to instill participants with a sense of personal responsibility for the ethical and moral choices they make. By extension, it also seeks to have an impact on the professions at large, improving the practices of all business executives, clergy, doctors, journalists and lawyers.

SEMINARY
PAPERS

Introduction to Selected Seminary Papers

In 2017, the FASPE Seminary program was led by Rabbi Jim Ponet, the Emeritus Howard M. Holtzmann Jewish Chaplain at Yale University, and Fr. Kevin Spicer, C.S.C., the James J. Kenneally Distinguished Professor of History at Stonehill College. This thoughtful team led a caring and deep-thinking group of 12 Seminary Fellows who represented religious traditions that included Catholicism, Judaism and several branches of Protestantism.

This group bridged religious differences to embrace each other, recognizing that they would share many of the same ethical challenges in their day-to-day work as religious leaders. Confronted by a history of the Holocaust that includes few good role models in Christian churches, our group faced the realization that religious leaders are not immune to ethical failings and that silent complicity can have the same effect as active participation.

The two papers that follow are examples of the essays and sermons that the Fellows submitted after the FASPE program. They represent the kind of deep-thinking and emotionally mature students who are attracted to the FASPE Seminary program.

The first is a paper written by Philippe Andal, who reflects on the FASPE program and concludes on a need for prophetic preaching. He writes that he is a witness to a nation “plagued by scourges” and calls on American religious leaders to draw on prophetic texts to “put the voices and experiences of the marginalized at the center of our concerns.” Although written as an academic paper, Philippe’s power as an orator shines through the text.

The second paper is a sermon written by Heidi Thorsen Oxford, who weaves together some of the experiences she had during the FASPE program to explore the challenges of thinking of ourselves as potential perpetrators both in the past and in the present day. She asks her listeners to think about where they fail to own up to their complicity. Drawing on a story in the Gospel of Mark, she pushes herself and her listeners to even think of Jesus as a man who, at least in one instance, appears to have been blind to his power and privilege. For Heidi, the story is a warning to all to remember that we are responsible for the plight of others.

On behalf of FASPE, I thank the Seminary faculty and Fellows for all they shared with me and each other, enriching the experience for everyone.

Thorin Tritter
Executive Director

Who Will Go for Us?

Speaking the Word of the Lord Through Prophetic Preaching in Times of National Crisis

BY PHILIPPE E. C. ANDAL

May 23, 2016, is a day I will not soon forget. In addition to being the date of my seminary graduation, it was also the date of my ordination. While much of it seems like a blur now, there are two things I remember vividly: One, the ceremony of the laying on of hands, when members of the clergy surrounded me to officially set me aside for the ministry; and two, the sermon preached for the occasion. As my pastor stood behind the pulpit without a single page of notes in front of him, he preached with a prophetic boldness from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah's commission as recorded in Isaiah chapter 6, from where I borrow the title of this essay. In a vision, Isaiah hears the Lord ask, "Who will go for us?"¹ In his simultaneously inspiring and sobering message, my pastor challenged me to pick up the mantle of Isaiah and the prophets, and to preach boldly the word of the Lord, for the rest of my life and ministry. It is a charge I took seriously, and one I am trying to faithfully fulfill every day.

June 20, 2017, is also a day I will not soon forget. On that day, I was sitting in a classroom in Berlin, Germany, while FASPE Seminary instructors passed around several primary sources of publications by clergy living in Nazi Germany. One such source was "A Sermon on *Bußtag* [Day of Atonement]" that was preached by Julius Von Jan. In his equally inspiring and sobering message — and following in the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah, another Hebrew prophet — Von Jan mounted the pulpit and boldly spoke the word of the Lord to preach against the injustice his fellow Germans were committing by imprisoning Jews in concentration camps in November 1938.

While there are many things I cannot forget from the two weeks I spent with FASPE visiting the sites of Nazi crimes in Germany and Poland, since returning home, it is the words of Von Jan, as well as those of my pastor at my ordination, that will not let me go. The haunting question of Isaiah, "Who will go for us?" and the command of Jeremiah to

¹ Isaiah 6:8

“speak the word of the Lord”² has gripped me as I reflect on how to apply my FASPE experience to more faithfully answer the divine summons on my life by using these ancient words and examples to inform my contemporary dilemma. To be sure, it will likely take more than a lifetime to answer this question sufficiently, but I am now persuaded that part of the answer lies in a return to prophetic preaching.

As I witness my own nation plagued by scourges that I feel strongly we should not abide — nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric spewed from the Oval Office, the removal of protections for Dreamers, the health of millions put in jeopardy by lawmakers whose constituents’ taxes insure their own access to excellent healthcare, immature world leaders threatening the global community with total nuclear war, white supremacists openly marching and spreading terror and violence (this time without hoods, shamelessly bearing naked faces), black and brown people lying dead in cold blood in the streets with no justice for their renegade murderers in blue — I see an obvious and renewed need for prophetic preaching by American religious leaders.

What Is Prophetic Preaching?

In *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, the American Protestant theologian and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann offers the following definition of prophetic preaching:

Prophetic proclamation is an attempt to imagine the world as though YHWH — the creator of the world, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians come to name as Father, Son, and Spirit — were a real character and an effective agent in the world.³

Brueggemann argues there is a dominant narrative in the world that stands in direct contradiction to God’s narrative for the world. He goes on to write:

Prophetic proclamation is the staging and performance of a contest between two narrative accounts of the world and an effort to show that the YHWH account of reality is more adequate and finally more reliable than the dominant narrative account that is cast among us as though it were true and beyond critique.⁴

So then, if this definition is accepted as true, prophetic preaching is preaching that considers the actual circumstances, affairs and state of the world, juxtaposes it with God’s desire for the world, and powerfully communicates this desire so that listeners are

² Jeremiah 22:29

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 2.

⁴ Brueggemann, 3.

persuaded to accept it as better and true and the only viable option. Prophetic preaching enables those listening to view their current situation through a future vision of divine potential. Prophetic preaching helps those who hear to see the world as it is and to see the world for what it can be through God. Prophetic preaching presents clearly previously obscured alternatives and allows people to choose what they wish for their lives and for their world, and it offers them a path whereby they might partner with God to achieve it. Prophetic preaching is what gives hope to the despairing, strength to the wounded, sight to the myopic and raises new life out of death and destruction.

How Can Modern Preachers Preach Prophetically?

Fortunately, prophetic preaching is an ancient tradition that has been passed down from the ancient Hebrew prophets and has managed to survive through a vocal minority of prophets who, in each generation, sacrificed something of their own lives to answer the holy call of God to “speak the word of the Lord” as it concerned the conditions of their times. Analyzing Von Jan’s sermon against the commentaries of several homileticians and biblical scholars who specialize in prophetic preaching, I will spend the rest of this essay offering methods by which modern preachers can return to prophetic preaching.

Modern Prophetic Preachers Must Reclaim the Text

There is a difficulty in preaching any ancient sacred text as we are far removed from its original context. While there is an extraordinary amount of historical-critical commentary available today, truly understanding the original context and meaning of an ancient text is a next-to-impossible task, especially for a congregational pastor who cannot devote his or her entire time to textual study and interpretation, but must also meet such demands as administering a congregation’s budget and attending to the pastoral needs of parishioners, while also maintaining balance in attending to his or her own personal life. Nevertheless, ancient sacred texts are the basis of prophetic teachings and those desiring to be prophetic preachers must be dedicated to their study. Yet, as biblical scholar and Howard University professor Cain Hope Felder warns, in doing so, preachers must not become “so preoccupied with what the Bible *meant* in various ancient settings that they ... postpone the task of determining what the Bible text means *today*.”⁵

When attempting to preach ancient texts, prophetic preachers must take extreme care and exhibit due consideration in how they read, exegete and interpret texts. Too often, texts have been used by oppressors to oppress. Preachers are often guilty of forgetting that, as Virginia-based pastor and author Jerome Ross has argued, “Scripture was written by people who were oppressed and living under one of six kinds of oppression (from Egyptian

⁵ Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 53.

oppression to Roman oppression).”⁶ When preachers forget this, it can lead to what both Brueggemann and Colgate professor and theologian Marvin McMickle have termed “royal consciousness,” whereby the currently dominant societal power structure is reinforced and the preacher only offers his or her listeners a vision of the future that reflects their current reality and accepts it as God’s will.⁷

Von Jan’s sermon, by contrast, exhibits the type of reclamation of ancient texts as the voice of the oppressed that is called for. Von Jan moved from the ancient sacred text of Jeremiah (specifically, Jeremiah 22:1-9) to the reality of Nazi Germany by proclaiming that the marginalized were “either in concentration camps or have been silenced.”⁸ He spoke out directly against the sentiments and views dominant among the German populace at the time, declaring the events of his time as an injustice that “the people at the top will not admit,” and attempting to raise the consciousness of his listeners with the words of Jeremiah, “Hear the word of the Lord!”⁹

Modern prophetic preachers must follow Von Jan’s example. They must reclaim prophetic texts in such a way that they put the voices and experiences of the marginalized at the center of our concerns, even when the preacher is not a member of the marginalized group of people about whom he or she is preaching. Preachers must empathetically enter into the realities of the marginalized and experience the ancient texts from their perspective in the midst of present-day realities. This means that today’s preachers must view the text through a variety of lenses and step into the shoes of women, Muslims, LGBTQIA persons, immigrants, black people and other people of color, and they must hear the word of the Lord concerning these groups and those who seek to oppress them, and they must be prepared to speak the word of the Lord on behalf of today’s oppressed.

Modern Prophetic Preachers Must Reimagine the World

Inasmuch as preachers must “hear the word of the Lord,” from the perspective of the marginalized, their interpretation of text and their preaching must move beyond naming the plight of those who are oppressed either in the text or in present-day society. Prophetic preachers must offer an alternative vision rooted in divine revelation.

Von Jan’s sermon reimaged the world. He unflinchingly declared God’s “retribution” toward and “wrath” against the German *Volk* or people for its actions and inaction. He

⁶ Jerome Ross, *The History of Ancient Israel and Judah: A Compilation* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing Co., 2003).

⁷ Marvin McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 11.

⁸ Eberhard Rohm and Jorg Thierfelder, eds. *Evangelische Kirche zwischen Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Bilder und Texte einer Ausstellung* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1982).

⁹ Rohm and Thierfelder.

imagined a “horrific harvest” that might be avoided if only the German people would repent of their ways.¹⁰ Von Jan reimagined the dominant German narrative of the time and offered an alternative vision for the future, albeit one that was apocalyptic.

Von Jan’s example suggests two things must occur in prophetic preaching: One, the current reality must be condemned; and two, the alternative vision must go beyond the dominant narrative. Preachers must stand in the shoes of the ancient prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah and others, and declare the judgment of God for current injustices, while simultaneously “out-imagining” the dominant narrative of their present reality.¹¹ To be sure, this is a most difficult task — one that may even put the modern preacher in danger with regards to his or her career, church and society at large. However, this is the call of the modern prophetic preacher — to be, as Columbia University professor and theologian Obery Hendricks puts it, “uncompromising” as this is, as he goes on to say, the defining characteristic of prophetic preachers.¹² If the modern prophetic preacher has reclaimed the text, has heard a word from the Lord and takes seriously the task of “out-imagining” the dominant narrative, then to be anything *but* uncompromising is to be profoundly unprophetic. Modern prophetic preachers must go so far in their uncompromising imagination that they and their communities become a manifestation of the alternative reality they are preaching. On this, theologian and Union Theological Seminary professor James Cone writes, “if it [the Church] lives according to the old order (as it usually has), then no one will believe its message.”¹³

Modern Prophetic Preaching Must Revisit the Call of the Preacher

Prophetic preaching is not only taxing on the soul; it is also taxing on the entire being of the preacher. The prophetic mantle often cost the ancient prophets social standing and even caused great personal and familial tension. Modern prophetic preachers, therefore, must intentionally take care of themselves. If modern prophetic preachers are to become a visible manifestation of the alternative reality they are preaching, this must also be reflected in the preacher’s personal life.

Von Jan makes this move at the end of his sermon, as he confessed that that moment of prophetic preaching was for him “like throwing off a huge burden.”¹⁴ In fact, he was so free

¹⁰ Rohm and Thierfelder.

¹¹ Brueggemann, 28.

¹² Iva E. Carruthers, et al. *Blow the Trumpet in Zion: A Global Vision and Action for the Twenty-First Century Black Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 80.

¹³ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 140.

¹⁴ Rohm and Thierfelder.

in that moment that he exclaimed, "Praise God!"¹⁵ He brought his sermon to a close by asserting a confidence in God's care for him, as he proclaimed, "It has been spoken before God and in God's name. Now let the world do with us what it will. We are in God's hands."

Modern prophetic preachers must return to what Hendricks calls "a tradition of interiority, of going silently inward to hear the voice of God."¹⁶ In their attempt to free the world from the dominant narrative, prophetic preachers must themselves experience freedom. Modern prophetic preachers must experience a wholeness not only in the message that they are preaching, but in the God of the message, who is true and who is still speaking through God's prophetic preachers. Modern prophetic preachers must continually experience the God of eternity, who speaks from and through even the most horrific of histories of the imperfect present to move us toward the prophesied future.

Rev. Philippe E. C. Andal currently serves as pastor of the Community Baptist Church in New Haven, CT. He received his master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School in 2016.

¹⁵ Rohm and Thierfelder.

¹⁶ Carruthers, 84.

Lessons from the Fig Tree

A Sermon to Progressive Churches on White Guilt

BY HEIDI THORSEN OXFORD

Mark 11:12-25

Guilt is a funny thing. It may be one of the earliest concepts that we learn as children. We understand guilt as soon as we consider the age old question, “Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?” As we grow older our understanding of guilt becomes more sophisticated. We learn from lawyers that guilt is an objective thing — that is, it can be proven with the help of witnesses, evidence and a fair trial. Then again, we learn from psychologists that guilt is a subjective thing — that is, we don’t always know why we experience guilt, but we know what it is when we feel it. As Christians, many of us have been told that we were born guilty. Christians call this original sin. This kind of guilt isn’t something that we earn; it’s something we were born with. Happily, our religious leaders and scriptures tell us that guilt is also something that can be taken away — expunged through our faith in a higher power, mediated by the person of Jesus.

Original sin. For me, these words trigger a kind of negative, gut reaction. I don’t want to believe that human beings are by nature evil, instead of good. I refuse to believe that the tiniest baby is already caught in the clutches of sin. Western Christianity is sin-obsessed. We spend so much time talking about the Fall that we forget to talk about the Garden. We worship the doctrine of original sin and obscure the doctrine of original goodness. Having grown up in an evangelical church that focused exclusively on the sinfulness of human beings, I have spent the majority of my adult life rebelling against the doctrine of original sin. I was a Christian in recovery. Scarred by the concept of original sin, I had to search for other ways of defining my faith and my relationship with God.

I had more or less gotten over the idea of original sin when July 2013 happened. For years I had tuned out the news, but that year I tuned in: Michael Brown, a young black man, was shot by a police officer without just cause on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and for the first time in my adult life I was jolted to an awareness of the ways in which racism is still alive and thriving in the United States. For the first time in my life I felt an aching sense of

culpability that was distinctly attached to the color of my skin. For the first time in my life I experienced white guilt — and it felt a lot like original sin.

What does it mean to be guilty? Even more so, what does it mean to be *born guilty*? These are questions that I've started to ask with a deeper sense of faith since July 2013. That year I felt a wave of guilt, suggesting all the ways that I have been complicit in the oppression of people of color by simply believing that racism was a thing of the past. That is my wakeup story, and perhaps you have one too.

It isn't a stretch to think of Nazi Germany when we reflect on the idea of original sin. The Holocaust, for so many people, marks one of the darkest moments in human history. If ever there were a time to abandon the doctrine of original goodness, and cling to the doctrine of original sin, the Holocaust is that moment. German guilt is, in many ways, a parallel phenomenon to the experience of white guilt. Generations of Germans have had to grapple with the legacy of Holocaust atrocities, just as generations of Americans have had to grapple with the legacy of slavery. But it's also important to remember that there is no equivalence between these histories, as author Ta-Nehisi Coates has written. Nazi insignias were almost immediately outlawed in Germany following World War II, while Confederate flags are still brazenly displayed throughout the United States, flying above government buildings and etched into the stained glass of churches.¹

While the Holocaust in Europe and slavery in America are by no means equivalent or interchangeable stories, they are both important touch points on matters of human dignity, human responsibility and guilt. I had the opportunity to explore these connections firsthand in June 2017, when I travelled to Germany and Poland with a group of eleven other seminarians as a FASPE Fellow. We were Christians from many different denominations — Lutheran, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Baptist. We were fortunate to be accompanied by two rabbis, one a student and the other an instructor, whose presence was especially meaningful given that the purpose of our trip was to study the Holocaust. Walking through the streets of Berlin and the dusty rubble of Auschwitz, we were invited to consider the ethical questions that we face on a daily basis as religious leaders who exercise authority in our respective communities.

The most powerful aspect of our trip, by far, was that we weren't encouraged to identify primarily with the victims, as is often the case in educational programs and museums about the Holocaust in the United States. Instead, we were told to imagine ourselves as the perpetrators. It's almost unnatural to do this. We don't want to see ourselves as the bad guys, the guilty ones. No, we want to see ourselves as the heroes in the story. And if we can't be the heroes, at least let us be the victims. Let us be the ones whom history regards with charity, sympathy and a certain degree of awe for having survived so much.

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Lost Cause Rides Again," *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/08/no-confederate/535512>.

Despite this natural resistance, I committed to the task at hand and walked through the gates of Auschwitz with heaviness in my heart. I told myself: I did this. Or, if I didn't do this, I certainly could have done it. I could have been caught in this web of power that led many people to profit from the eviction of their Jewish neighbors, buying up cheap furniture and working blindly for the war effort. Or even worse, I could have been the one to denounce my neighbor. I could have been the one to type up their death certificate, sitting in a cushy office in the Polish town of Oswiecim.

As I walked along the abandoned railroad inside Auschwitz, the rubble of gas chambers and the meadows that bear the traces of human remains, I found myself turning to my faith. But the first prayer that came to my lips wasn't *Kyrie Eleison* — "Lord, have mercy" — but rather a prayer of confession. In the silence of my mind I repeated, over and over again, the confession that we say each Sunday as part of our liturgy in the Episcopal Church:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us;
That we may delight in your will,
And walk in your ways,
To the glory of your Name. Amen.

For better and for worse, our churches are in the business of managing guilt. In some ways I'm really glad that this is the case. I look forward to the confession every Sunday, not because I enjoy being reminded of my guilt, but because I *need* to be reminded of the ways that I am hurting God and other people around me. In the confession we balance out the doctrine of original goodness with the doctrine of original sin. I am invited to see myself as I truly am: the good parts with the bad.

But I sometimes wonder whether confession alone is good enough. Hannah Arendt, a Jewish philosopher and chronicler of Nazi trials after the Holocaust, speaks to this insufficiency. "Where all are guilty, no one is;" she writes in her book *Crises of the Republic*, "confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing."²

² Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Hartourt Brace & Company, 1972), 163.

As members of so-called progressive churches — Episcopal, Lutheran, PCUSA, UCC and more — we are no strangers to the concept of corporate confession. We are also not strangers to the concept of white guilt. We decorate our churches with progressive slogans, peace poles and rainbow flags. We march in protests and host food pantries. We walk the walk and talk the talk. But is our collective confession enough? Is our social activism enough? Perhaps we've spent so much time trying to be like Jesus that we always see ourselves as either the victim or the hero. But we struggle to see ourselves in that third category, a category that we certainly would never associate with Jesus. We struggle to see ourselves as the perpetrators. This, in a nutshell, is the phenomenon of white guilt: we may admit our feelings of guiltiness, but we fail to own up to our complicity.

Perhaps matters would be different — perhaps we would know what to do — if we felt like Jesus could relate to us in our experience of white guilt. This, after all, is the concept at the heart of incarnational theology. Christianity revolves around the conviction that Jesus became human as we are human, and in this way God understands our suffering. So the question remains: Can this incarnational God join us in the very real, painful and confusing experience of white guilt?

Before I go on, I have to say that the very idea of identifying Jesus with the perpetrators, instead of the oppressed, is a difficult and perhaps even foolish thing to do. The Jesus that we know from the gospels is a person who walked, first and foremost, with those who were oppressed. He was friends with the sick, the lame, children, Samaritans and Jews who were beaten down by the Roman Empire. But it is also true that Jesus associated with those who were higher up within the systems of power. Jesus associated with centurions and tax collectors. I have to believe that if Jesus cared about the tax collector then Jesus cares about people who are tangled up in other systems of oppression. Jesus cares about people like you and me.

But I don't just want to know that Jesus cares about people like me. I want to know that Jesus understands people like me, in a deep incarnational way. I want to know whether Jesus understands what it feels like to wield the power of a perpetrator. Looking to the Bible, I found it: the story I needed to hear as a white person in 2017. It's a strange little anecdote, mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark (though I'll focus more on Mark from here on out). It is the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree.³

Christians struggle with this story. It just feels so out of character. The day after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in the days preceding his death and sacrifice, Jesus is walking down the road in Bethany and he's hungry. Fortunately, he sees a fig tree in leaf not too far away. He bends down to pick the fruit, but finds that there's nothing on the bush — which is not surprising, given that, as the writer of the story tells us, it was not the season for figs. Jesus then curses the fig tree, saying aloud so his disciples can hear it,

³ Mark 11:12-25.

“May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” Then he and his disciples continue on their merry way.

The next day is a big one for Jesus. Now here’s a story we are all familiar with: Jesus marches into the Temple in Jerusalem, only to find it crowded with merchants and money changers. Jesus, being the social justice warrior that he is, flips over the tables, boldly proclaims that the people have turned their house of prayer into a den of robbers and then walks clear out of the city. Mic drop.

The next day Jesus and the disciples are strolling along, and they happen to pass by the same fig tree. But this time, the fig tree has withered away to its roots. Jesus explains some business about, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, you will receive,” and then some more business about forgiving each other, and then the story is over. That’s all we hear about the fig tree in the Gospel of Mark.

Now you can understand why this story might be a little bit disconcerting to Christian commentators. We generally don’t like to think of our Lord and Savior as the kind of person who would curse a fig tree to wither and die, purely out of spite. For this reason, scores of Biblical commentators have sought to explain away the complications of this story. Some commentators have gone a horticultural route, explaining that the fig tree actually *should* have been in fruit based on the Biblical chronology, or explaining that the tree would have shown evidence as to whether or not it could bear fruit in the future. Other commentators focus on Jesus’ teachings following the disciples’ discovery of the withered tree, emphasizing that this is a story about the amazing things that people can do through prayer. Of course, this still fails to explain why Jesus would pray for such a destructive thing in the first place.

As a modern reader, peering through the lens of centuries of criticism and historical detail, I believe this story is here for a reason. I believe this story is here to show us that Jesus — yes, even Jesus — wielded the power to inflict unnecessary harm on other living things. Jesus doesn’t go so far as to do the truly sinful things that we, as humans do, in the harm that we inflict on one another. Nevertheless, Jesus models a kind of selfish behavior that we are all too capable of falling into when we stand in positions of power and privilege.

Most importantly, Jesus’ behavior towards the fig tree reminds me of what white guilt looks like in my life. How many times have I, as a white person of privilege, cast judgment on another person simply because they didn’t have the same opportunities that I have had? How many times have white people cursed black and brown communities, like Jesus cursed the fig tree, when they didn’t bear the fruits that we wanted or expected — even though the climate and the season have never been ripe for their flourishing? And furthermore, how many times have we indulged this kind of prejudice only to walk into the Temple the next day and flip a few tables? We rest on the laurels of a few social justice moments — that one time we walked in a march, the handful of times we posted on

Facebook — but we don't examine ourselves for the kinds of subtle racist attitudes and actions that we commit each day. We are not always the victims or the heroes of the story. Sometimes, we are the perpetrators.

When I read the story of the fig tree today, I hear God's voice calling out to me over the centuries saying that I need to come clean about the truth that I have just as much ability to do harm, as I have to do good. I remember what it felt like to walk through the streets of Berlin and to be in Auschwitz and to feel this truth firsthand. And while I don't always know what the best next steps are for me to counteract the sin of racism in my life, I know that I cannot continue to walk in my faith until I face the harm that I have inflicted on others.

In the story of Jesus and the fig tree, it is important to remember that Jesus doesn't simply brush off Peter when he notices the fig tree on the road back to Bethany. Instead, Jesus stops, examines his past actions, and seeks to learn something from them. Now I have to admit that Jesus' lesson to his disciples about the fig tree still remains enigmatic to me, as it does to many commentators as well. Nevertheless, Jesus tries to make sense of this thing that he has done. And I think this is a reminder to us to do the same — to wrestle with our wrongdoing, to try and make sense of the framework behind our actions and to resolve to act differently in the future.

There is no absolution in the world that can absolve us of white guilt. This is a frightening reality, but it's true. It's true because racism is not an individual sin, and as soon as we seek forgiveness, racism will rear its ugly head in this world and we will be complicit in it. But I encourage us to never tire of confessing. Never tire of humbling yourself and recognizing the evil that other people have had to put up with at your expense. Never tire of being vulnerable when your stories of striving and failure can make a difference.

I want to conclude with the absolution for our sin — and I hope you will hear this, not as a gesture of comfort, but as a call to action. Remember, in the silence that follows, there is more to be done. There is so much more to be done. Please join with me, as you feel called:

Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. Amen.

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