

We shouldn't be surprised by sin in the world

By [Jason Micheli](#)

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“What’s happening to America?”

I’ve overheard such comments, exasperated and worried, frequently of late. Baton Rouge, Minnesota, Dallas, Nice, Baton Rouge again: “Has the world lost its mind?”

I sympathize with the sentiment. Nonetheless, it betrays a naiveté that Christians, of all people, should not have. Christians, of all people, are those who know we’re guilty. Sinners, that is.

Christians do not have the optimistic assessment of human nature or romanticized visions of our societal institutions such that we could be shocked or surprised by news stories of police corruption, racial furor, and terrorism.

During World War II, Dorothy Day did not base her advocacy for Christian nonviolence on utopian delusions about the church or on Christians’ distinction apart from the common lot of sinners. Rather it was on a deep penitential awareness of Christians’ solidarity with all other human beings in sin. Day believed nonviolence was a mandate for Christian practice not because Christians are fundamentally peaceful creatures but because we’re not at all. We’re sinners. Day preached Christian nonviolence not because we’re a people who know peace is the better way in the world but because we’re a people who know we cannot be trusted with violence.

Rather than asking “What’s happening to America?” (because, of course, the correct answer is that nothing new is happening to America, it’s just being videoed with greater frequency today), Christians should be pointing out—confessing—that it’s not just that we’re all individual sinners. We’re sinful creatures who create sinful, sin-prone institutions. Of course police departments and justice departments can be corrupt and even racist. Of course movements like Black Lives Matter are not entirely innocent and have members whose motives aren’t pure. Of course America continues to reap what it sowed in the antebellum South.

A woman who worships at my church, a skilled writer in addition to being a gardener, put it this way:

Gardeners understand original sin because the weed seeds are already in the soil—they've been there for years. In fact, the work you do to break up the soil, to prepare it for something good, brings weed seeds up to the surface. All the compost and aeration you put in the soil makes it prime real estate for weeds as well as for your plants.

Christians have a language to describe the things video and social media expose with alarming regularity these days. The language of sin. We're all captive, as Paul says, to the principalities and powers. We're all in service to them from time to time, unwittingly even, aiding and abetting them despite our best intentions.

It's a language I hear almost no one speaking, possibly because you cannot speak it without also simultaneously confessing your own complicity. Even I, for example, perpetuate a racism that my own boys, who are not white, will inevitably be affected by one day.

Sin is the reason why appeals to unity ("We're all Americans") ring false and hollow. Theologian William Cavanaugh says that

our mysticism of nationalism tends to occlude our class divisions such that those who point out the class divisions in American get accused of waging class warfare, which is analogous to arsonists complaining that the fire department keeps reporting to the blazes they've set.

You can replace "class divisions" with "racial divisions" and Cavanaugh's point still holds. When so many are shocked and anxious these days, Christians should be the people who are not surprised at all that another fire is blazing, for only through such an unsurprised people will others hear the news that we cannot, even in America, save, redeem, heal, or even better ourselves.

Gardening and firefighting are apt metaphors for the work Christians call confession, for Christians know that we're seldom in a position to know the truth about our sin until we have made our lives available to others in a way that we might be shown the truth about ourselves, especially in matters where the wrong cannot easily be made right, which Stanley Hauerwas says "is the character of most matters that

matter.”

In other words, making confession is not possible apart from making the relationships necessary to expose the extent of our sinfulness. Black lives matter for, without them, white Christians cannot know ourselves sufficiently to confess our sin.

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