

The Donald and Me

Colleagues,

The Republican convention cuts loose next Monday in the city I call home these days. With the date so near, a sense of dread is finally intruding on the euphoria that gripped the place last month when the local basketball team pulled off the impossible and beat the media darlings from that insufferable metropolis to the far west. Last week vomited up realities of a horrifically different kind in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and especially Dallas. The dread here grew exponentially. I talked about that in my preaching last week, though hardly well enough. Now come reports in what remains of a local paper about security arrangements for next week. A zone will be established around the locus of the proceedings. Glass bottles and other nasty items will be forbidden within. Not so guns. Ohio, after all, is an “open carry” state, and local jurisdictions are not allowed to override this no matter what exigencies they face.

We will pray again for Cleveland at church this weekend. I ask you to pray as well. Let’s pray for the nation as a whole, while we’re at it.

As for the madness that bans bottles and permits pistols, one of these days I (or one of you) should reflect on that as a minor manifestation of the wrath of God, who keeps insisting that we reap what we sow, etc. My own sensibilities being as they are, that would surely lead to a grimmer reflection on next week’s featured astonishment, Candidate Donald Trump, as a greater manifestation of the same wrath.

As it happens, today’s offering brushes against this latter thought, though without engaging it head on. Our contributor is Mike Hoy, former writer and editor of the Crossings newsletter,

and editor as well of Robert W. Bertram's posthumous publications. He sent this to me some weeks ago. Now seems a propitious time to pass it along. Those of us charged with the public proclamation of the Word of God in days like these will want to pay particular attention when Mike swivels his spotlight halfway through.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Why there is an "I" in Donald Trump—and the rest of us

Here we are less than six months prior to the presidential election, and we already know that Donald J. Trump will be one of the principle candidates on the ballot for the highest office this nation has to offer. Robert Putnam in *The New York Times* (5/8/16) reported, "The economic deprivation of the last 30 years for working-class whites, combined with growing social isolation, was really dry tinder," and Mr. Trump "lit a spark." The firestorm of support is evident in rise to ascendancy as the embattled-and-embittered presumptive nominee for the Republican party. He has no political experience, yet this is seen by many of his flocking supporters as a plus rather than a minus. He shows no regard for others and is probably incapable of empathy, and yet he is admired as one who "tells it like it is."

So let's do that—tell it like it is. But the more serious truth-telling is not only about Donald Trump but all of us in America.

My title suggests there is an "I" in Donald Trump. Consider the third letter of his first name: "N," as in this case, "narcissistic."

This is not news. Trump has been analyzed and diagnosed by

psychologists looking objectively at his profile as suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (DSM-IV). He has a totally exaggerated sense of self-importance and is in love with himself, and in such a way that nobody else (and especially those who do not love him in return) matters. It would be comical were it not for the fact that he is on the cusp of becoming one of the world's most powerful leaders. There are many who say he would be dangerous in that capacity, and they are probably correct.

Yet he is not alone in being narcissistic. Almost 40 years ago, Christopher Lasch published his monumental work, *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. America is a narcissistic nation. And it seems the problem has worsened.

Consider the dipsticks of narcissistic behavior:

1. Having an exaggerated sense of self-importance
2. Preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love
3. Believing one is "special" and can only be understood by, or associated with, other special or high-profile people or institutions
4. Requiring excessive admiration
5. Having a sense of entitlement
6. Selfishly taking advantage of others to achieve one's own ends
7. Lacking empathy
8. Often envious of others or believing others to be envious of oneself
9. Showing arrogant, haughty, patronizing, or contemptuous behaviors or attitudes

Consider further that the disorder of narcissism is real when only five of this list are applicable. There is just too much

evidence to convict America. The reason not many are speaking about Trump's "I" (i.e., narcissistic) problem is because we are also so deeply infected, even if not to the extremes of complete narcissistic behavior. Yet even though this has been developing in America, this "I" problem has been around a lot longer than our nation. It has been evident ever since the origin of our sin. The "I" problem is universal, and no one is exempted.

It was during Trump's acceptance speech following his endorsement by the NRA that I began to see in him something I had not seen before: how it is that narcissism not only makes people incredibly shallow, but deeply insecure. Why was Trump rehearsing again all his political victories of states that "I won," less with a sense of deep regard for the people of those states as regarding them as trophies on his own personal shelf to be reviewed? It was because he needed to continue to prop up his sense of self-importance. This made sense when considering his rise to popularity, because people (e.g., the aforementioned working-class whites, among others) who believe they have a sense of being trampled upon do not necessarily translate that into a concession that their core value of narcissism must also die. This is a deeper insight into our "I" problem. Because of our inflated sense of who we are, we refuse to die. We refuse to concede the "god" we have made of ourselves and find ways only to inflate it, like blowing up a balloon that is already full of holes. This is the most dangerous truth we have to see in America today. It is not Donald Trump, but it is what he represents—that the "I" does not need to die, even when the truth of its dying is so evident.

I confess that that problem is deeply frightening. There was a reason that Luther led off his list of 95 theses with the candid statement that, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Our day, our life, our being starts with the death

of our “I”, and from personal experience, it dies very hard.

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The place where our “I” can die is the same place where our being can be renewed: at the foot of the cross. Whenever we partake in the sacrament, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26) We die and rise again in his forgiveness. The same could, and should, be said of preaching. But sadly, in my estimation, the status of preaching today has degenerated to moralism.

Just recently I came to worship on two consecutive Sundays at two different places, and walked away with disappointment from both. On Mother’s Day, my wife and I were invited to by a couple of Karen’s friends who were members at a local Missouri Synod congregation. I feared the message might be more of the legalism I had become accustomed to experience in the LC-MS. But it was more of a forty-minute motivational speech on the order of the prosperity gospel, surrounded by a band playing contemporary music to songs which were largely un-singable. There was little reference to Jesus the Christ in this motivational speech, save for a brief snippet where I thought the preacher might actually lift up the gospel-joy of the resurrection on this last Sunday of Easter. It quickly degenerated back to the theme of what we *must do* to “live forever.” The second was by a synodical official at my parents (and my older) ELCA home congregation celebrating its 100th anniversary. He was charming and delightful to listen to. His message on this Pentecost Sunday lifted up how the book of Acts called for change, and how in the midst of change people sometimes fight; but forgiveness can endure for one another. Jesus was referenced for his teaching to his disciples that forgiveness is seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness should be overflowing. Nonetheless, there was no mention made by this preacher of the cross at the center

of such forgiveness, nor how deep the need for reconciliation really goes. It all rested on the message that Jesus *said* it, therefore *do* it. Moralism in preaching can be benign moralism, maybe even entertaining moralism, but moralism nonetheless.

Even from this small sample size of these two examples, the problem of preaching contributes to the problem of our American narcissism. It does not lead us to repentance from the “I” problem, but only calls our “I” to do or try new things. Rarely does preaching challenge our “I” to die in order that we may live—the promise that was given to us in our baptism.

Are we afraid of that deep sense of repenting? What do you think, Donald?

If we are, and I can think of why we should be, then let us return to the cross and the open tomb of our Lord, where the fear of dying and repentance is turned into great joy: Jesus “showed them his hands and his side; then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.’” (John 20:20-21)

M. Hoy

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