

Corona Chronicle

Week 26

Wednesday, Sept. 9th

And so we reach the half-year mark – at least according to my keeping of these “chronicles” – and, sadly, the death toll has passed 190,000.

It is getting harder and harder for many people – especially those who are older and who live alone – to cope with this isolation.

Yesterday I went to visit a friend who is feeling quite isolated. We met outside her apartment building and strolled slowly, with our masks on, speaking of her situation, and of the events of the day. Soon we found ourselves talking about politics, and wondering together about why it is that evangelical Christians (at least the white evangelicals) gravitate towards a certain set of political stances and support certain politicians – even if these politicians are not actually church-going evangelicals themselves?

My friend postulated that the reason had to do with something called the “prosperity gospel.” As far as I knew, this term indicates a belief that if you are faithful (according to these believers’ standards), and work hard, God will reward you with health, wealth, and general prosperity. And the flip side of this is that if you are poor, unemployed, or otherwise struggling in your life it must be because you are *not* faithful and are probably lazy: in other words, that we get what we deserve. Apparently this attitude drives many people’s stances on government support for healthcare, welfare, and even public school spending. These “faithful” white evangelical Christians tend to think that it is not right or fair for Americans to be taxed to support those who are struggling – because these less fortunate folks are just getting what they deserve.

It struck me, as someone who once took Christianity quite seriously (having studied for two and a half years at the Episcopal Divinity School), as *absurd* to think that anyone could find support for such beliefs in any of the four gospels of the New Testament. Everyone knows that Jesus was famous for saying things like “Blessed are the poor,” and “the first shall be last, and the last first.” Not only did Jesus (according to his purported words in the gospels) not promise riches or power or a long life, but he taught that faithfulness to his way demanded of his followers severe *self-denial*:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (Matthew 16: 24-25)

And so, even though I myself rejected Christianity as my own spiritual path (since I found I could not believe in the divinity of Jesus, nor that his death by crucifixion somehow “took away the sins of the world”) – nevertheless, it was offensive to me to hear that people who consider themselves Christians could even have a system of belief called the “prosperity gospel.” And I would think that it would be even *more* offensive to Jesus!

I found myself still wondering about all of this when I woke up this morning, so I sat down early at my computer and googled “prosperity gospel.” Apparently this is a unique American phenomenon, which arose out of the Protestant work ethic and the Calvinist idea of predestination, with a large dose of Norman Vincent Peale mixed in (re: the “power of positive thinking”). In this kind of system, if a person, even a minister or spiritual teacher, has managed to amass for himself (it is almost always a *him*) vast wealth, a lavish estate, expensive cars, yachts, private jets, expensive clothes, etc., it is seen as a sign that he is *blessed by God* – and that that in itself is a sign of his faithfulness. (But what if it is instead a sign of greed, corruption, and hypocrisy? Somehow this doesn’t come up!)

Now you may wonder what a poor white person gets out of following (and often sending money to) an already wealthy religious teacher or politician? Apparently, what they get is *hope* – hope that they too will eventually be faithful enough and work hard enough to be able to share in this material bounty. In addition, they enjoy a vicarious pride in the material success of this person with whom they identify. And when they do this together with other white Christians (who may also be poor, but not always), they attain a sense of *group belonging*.

This last item is something that we Jews can identify with: think of how much pride we Jews took in our group identity when the young, still-struggling nation of Israel beat all the odds in being victorious in the Six-Day War. Most American Jews still take vicarious pride in (and send money to) the nation of Israel today. Some say it is because they are our “last resort” if we ever have to take refuge from a plague of anti-Semitism in America. But I suspect that the pleasure we take in *group belonging* is a stronger motivator than fear of Jewish persecution on this continent.

And so why shouldn't white evangelicals enjoy their own sense of group belonging? Can't they stand together and yet still do many good deeds in the world (as Israel does in responding to earthquakes and other disasters, sending in rescue teams all over the world when these things occur)?

Yes, of course they can, and I'm sure there are many evangelical Christian charitable organizations that work to alleviate poverty, disease, etc. around the world. But the belief that the white Christian culture of America has been "blessed" because its members are somehow more "deserving" than other populations is problematic. It comes far too close to the phenomenon of "white privilege," which is evidenced in these Christians' unwillingness to engage with American Christianity's less-than "faithful" past. They do not want to look at how white Christians used the Bible to undergird the institution of slavery, nor to take responsibility for the many long-lasting consequences of that, the ripples of which are still felt in the African-American population today.

Thus, having studied up on the "prosperity gospel," I fell down the rabbit-hole of "related topics" on the internet. One article was on how, in this moment of Black Lives Matter, thirty years of effort put into "reconciliation work" between black and white evangelical churches has recently gone down the drain. The white evangelicals are fine with talking with black evangelicals about not being prejudiced towards *individuals* of another race; but they do not want to deal with the past, or with our culture at large; they do not want to admit that there is such a thing as *systemic racism* – racism baked into almost all aspects of our society.

From here I discovered Emmanuel Acho's YouTube series, "Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man." In one episode, Acho (a former NFL linebacker) sits in conversation with the white actor, Matthew McConaughey. Near the end of their discussion, McConaughey quotes a phrase from a Langston Hughes poem: "Let American Be America Again":

*O, let America be America again –
The land that never has been yet –*

These lines took my breath away: yes, Langston Hughes put his finger precisely on the contradiction of America! Our ideals were superb, stellar, from the beginning (or at least from the time of Jefferson) – these ideals of freedom, equality, liberty... these are what the stars in our flag are about, what we pledge to when we utter the

Pledge of Allegiance. But, as Hughes so correctly wrote (in 1935) – this is a *land that has never been yet*.

So of course I had to look up this poem – which, it turns out, is too long to quote here in its entirety (I urge you to look it up at <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>.)

But let me quote a few salient sections, and with that I will close for this week:

Let America Be America Again

*Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.*

(America never was America to me.) ...

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

*(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.") ...*

*I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed! ...*

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.*

...

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

*Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!*



An iconic feature of the American border: Niagara Falls (from a 2010 family trip).