

Dr. John Dorhauer, Speech UEK Full Conference 2019 Dresden

This is a great honor for me to speak to all of you today. (add some personal notes here).

I want to speak about the grief I, and many good-hearted American citizens, now live with. The America we grew up with is in danger of disappearing.

That is heartbreaking to me. Three years ago, I could not imagine the America we see today. Yes, racism existed. Yes, we argued about how to protect our borders, especially after the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in September of 2001. And yes, a part of the American story was the subjugation and genocide of our indigenous populations.

And yet I grew up as a child hearing important narratives. These were stories that shaped a belief in the inherent goodness and dignity of all human beings. It created a desire to overcome any obstacles to those dreams being fully realized.

As a child, I heard the sermons and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I grew up every day of my childhood watching America struggle to overcome racism in its historic Civil Rights movement.

My teachers read to me the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, during whose presidency the slaves were emancipated.

Perhaps most endearing to me was the story of the Statue of Liberty. Of all the monuments erected across the American landscape, this one had the most impact on shaping my sense of what it meant to be an American. Lady Liberty's presence in the harbor served to remind me that America was a land of refugees and immigrants. Not unlike the book of Exodus, which served to remind those who entered into covenant with their Creator, our narrative began with the simple phrase 'once we were slaves; once we were immigrants; once we were strangers.'

That is a powerful way to start your story. America was the land of opportunity for what the poet Emma Lazarus, whose composition "The New Colossus" is inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, called "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore." Lady Liberty was called "The Mother of Exiles", and we were told that from her beacon-hand a 'world-wide welcome' was extended to all.

Many Americans made a trip to Ellis Island where Lady Liberty stood. Seeing her for the first time was a breath-taking moment for all of us. Arriving for the first time as

a child, you were told the stories of the immigrants whose lives were changed there. You were shown photographs of the families as they landed here from countries the world over. You read the entries in log books where every name, every date, every entry was recorded for history. Finding the name of an ancestor was a religious experience.

This was our common story. America was the land of possibility where any person from anywhere in the world could arrive with nothing and, by hard work and within a culture of welcome, start their life over.

This was the American myth. Statue and poem and story and picture all conspired to instill within every child growing up in America a pride in knowing that we welcomed the stranger.

Myth and reality are often two different things. Myth and narrative are often used less to describe current circumstances than to inspire future hopes. They describe what we should aspire to become in contrast to what we currently are.

Let me be clear about one thing: in spite of the myth of Lady Liberty who lifted her lamp beside the golden door to welcome the homeless, tempest-tost from around the world, xenophobia and racism have also always been a part of the American cultural landscape. But the Civil Rights movement of my childhood used the stories of welcoming the stranger to marginalize the bigots and minimize their impact.

Donald Trump is the first public figure in my lifetime to be elected because he is a racist. For me, the arc of history had always slowly bent towards justice – and the voices of the ignorant racists, white supremacists, misogynists and homophobes, while they did not disappear, were moved into the margins where they had little power and less credibility.

America has now elected a racist and a xenophobe and a misogynist and a homophobe. Decades of civil rights activism had won significant victories in voting rights for blacks, reproductive rights for women, marriage rights for same gender loving couples, equal rights for the Trans community. They are now being dismantled over night, and our defining narrative is being rewritten.

In 2016, with the election of Donald Trump, our narrative shifted.

Immigrants were now publicly called murderers, rapists, and drug dealers—by the President.

Muslims were called terrorists and became the subject of a never before seen in American ban on an entire religion.

Women became the object of men's leering gaze as a man who was caught on tape bragging that he could grab a woman's genitals because he was famous and she wanted it would two weeks later be elected President.

Africa became a shithole country – a statement that made obvious this president's predilection for crude language, his blatant racism directed largely at black and brown populations, and his complete ignorance about world geography. (As a side note, when he recently embarrassed himself by speaking openly and publicly about buying Greenland, a social media post said "Ok, we will let him do it, but only if first he can point to it on a map.")

Four duly elected Congressional representatives, three of whom were born US Citizens, and the fourth, a Somali refugee, is a naturalized citizen, were subjected to a chant led by our President at a public rally wherein the participants shouted over and over again "Send them back." Hate crimes are on the rise again in the United States.

The America I grew up believing in and falling in love with is disappearing. This is less about Donald Trump than it is about a re-emerging racist American population that sees a racist, white supremacist Donald Trump as their new hope. His slogan 'make America great again' is translated by many to mean 'make America white again'. He is taking us back to the glory days of our racist past after the America I grew up spent decades working to rid itself of by listening to the narratives about welcoming the stranger.

We are not alone. England has elected its own populist, Boris Johnson. Hungary has Viktor Orban, India has Narendra Modi, and Brazil has Jair Bolsonaro. In addition to all of these, Israel continues to move harder and farther to the right under Benjamin Netanyahu, who has forged an unholy alliance with Donald Trump.

This is where the Church, which always transcends national borders and political boundaries, comes in to play. For me, the question is this: will we will keep the narrative of hope alive? Can we remember the stories that inspired generations to embrace the stranger? Will we stand up to the bullies who want are chanting "Send them back" and remind them that "once we were strangers"?

This is the call to the Church. Mindful of Esther, we in the United Church of Christ believe we were called for just such a time as this. Mindful of Isaiah, we respond to our call with a simple "Here I am, Lord." Mindful of Jesus on the night he died, we repeat over and over again the motto of our denomination: "That they may all be one."

The kind of unity prayed for by Jesus and desired by the United Church of Christ is not the unity of forced conformity, but is best articulated in what is an oft repeated phrase in our denomination: "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

May I repeat that? “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

What does that sound like?

It is strikingly similar to the words of Emma Lazarus: ‘send me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ No matter who you are or where you come from, you are welcome here.

The Church writ large and the United Church of Christ in particular feel a call from the Holy Spirit of the living God and the risen Christ to maintain the narrative of welcome, of unity, of love, of acceptance, of equity, of justice for all.

Four years ago, one full year before Donald Trump was elected, the United Church of Christ went through the process of articulating a purpose statement, a mission statement, and a vision statement. Led by the Holy Spirit, this is what we wrote at the end of that.

Our purpose, which is the answer to the question, “Why does God need us?”, was simply this: to love the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Our mission was to love all, welcome all, seek justice for all.

Our vision, an answer to the question “If we complete our mission, what do we see?”, was this: a just world for all.

We did not anticipate the rise of fascism in America when we wrote those statements. But having written them, they now read like an urgent imperative.

If not we, then who?

If not now, then when?

The United Church of Christ stands ready to receive the call of the Holy Spirit to engage our country, indeed our world, in the articulation of a gospel of love and hope that stands as an antidote to the rhetoric of hate and despair that daily emanates from the highest office in our land.

Since both the election of Donald Trump and the writing of our purpose, mission, and vision statement I have taken to preaching over and over again the passage from Luke, chapter 10 in which Jesus says the whole law can be summed up in this: love your God and love your neighbor.

I recently learned an important lesson about being welcomed as a stranger.

I was in Bethlehem one morning. I was a stranger in a strange land.

I was walking down a narrow, crowded, cobblestone street surrounded by tall buildings on both sides with vendors selling their products. Cars tried to drive down the hill where I was walking, but the crowd was very thick. A van turned onto that street. It could not make it through the crowd, so I found myself walking side by side with it for a minute or two. Leaning outside the window of the van was a small child. I think she was about six years old.

She was holding a bottle of water in her hands and squeezing it. An arc of water would shoot out, and she would giggle with delight upon seeing it. She was not paying any attention to the stranger who was now walking next to her, and so when she squeezed the bottle again the water hit me right in the chest. She looked up and saw that my suit was soaking wet. Her look went from one of delight to one of fright. She thought she was in trouble.

Now, if ever there was a child anywhere in the world who had a reason to fear the stranger, it was this little Palestinian child. She grew up on streets with armed soldiers. She could not leave the walls of her city without the permission of those soldiers. Which made what would follow all the more remarkable.

Seeing the fright on her face, and wanting to disarm her fear, and not knowing what language she spoke, I simply smiled at her to let her know I was not angry. She immediately smiled right back at me. Seeing me smile, and finding her joy again, she looked at me and said "hello!" I said "Hello" back to her.

Then, this audacious little child looked me straight in the eyes and saying, "What's your name?"

I said, "John. What's yours?"

She said, "Sama."

I said, "Sama - you're beautiful."

Those would be the last words between us. Upon hearing them, she just started giggling. She turned briefly back to her parents in the van, as if to say, "You heard that, didn't you," then turned back to me and continued laughing.

Just then, the crowd opened up on the street and the van was able to drive to the bottom of the hill where it made a right turn. As it disappeared around the corner, I could still hear her laughing.

I have never forgotten this story. I tell it often to suggest that this is the world I want to live in. It is a world in which children learn to welcome the stranger.

All over the world children hear stories about how strangers carry guns; about how strangers are to be feared; about how strangers are murderers, rapists, and drug dealers; about how black people can't be trusted; about how Muslims are terrorists. Someone has to stand up and teach our children to smile at the stranger in their midst and to love their neighbor – whoever they are or wherever they come from.

Sama inspires me. She should have been afraid of me – and she wasn't.

What stories had she heard that helped her welcome the stranger?

What she did was pure instinct – and it was beautiful. We have an obligation to reclaim those stories and repeat them over and over again to our children and grandchildren.

It cannot happen on our watch that the only stories our children hear are stories that teach them to hate and to fear.

It cannot happen on our watch that the only people our children trust and respect are the people who look like them, speak their language, eat their foods, or sing their songs.

It cannot be the case that on our watch the Church remains silent in the face of a growing racism that we had worked decades to eradicate.

As the body of Christ, our stories inspire such kindness and compassion between strangers. The Good Samaritan stands out because it not only reinforces this concept of kindness to one another, it radicalizes kindness to see our neighbor as precisely the one whom we have been taught to hate and fear. In Jesus' time, the Samaritans were the enemy. In America today, Jesus would tell the story not of the Good Samaritan, but of the Good Iraqi, the Good Syrian, the Good Somali, or the Good Yemeni – all countries currently on our travel ban list.

The United Church of Christ is taking its call to love our neighbor very seriously. Here are a few acts of kindness to the stranger that I have witnessed:

- Rev. Sally Pontoh in Madbury NH had over 80 of her Indonesian members detained by our government and threatened with deportation. She began a resistance movement that won back the release of those refugees and granted them all court hearings to retry their cases. She was named Newsmaker of the Year by her local newspaper for her heroic efforts.
- Global Cleveland wanted to publicize our city as an immigrant friendly city. Their first meeting was with the United Church of Christ. On Sep. 16th we hosted an interfaith service of welcome in our own Amistad Chapel. The next day, at the Cleveland City Club I was asked to introduce the keynote speaker

for the week, Khzir Khan, a Pakistani immigrant whose son, a US citizen and soldier, was killed in the US/Iraq war in 2004 and who spoke at the Democratic Presidential Convention in 2016.

- A UCC church outside our nation's capital hung pajamas on a clothesline next to photographs of detained immigrant children. When asked why they did this, pastor Kathy Dwyer said "Every child should be able to sleep in a bed and be tucked in. But some have to sleep in cages."
- Members at Good Shepherd UCC in Durham, NC now visit 14 year old Ixcell Perez, a 14 year old native of Chiapas MX who is dying of leukemia. She and her mother were denied entry to receive life-saving medical treatment, but a relative living in the US was able to get her here – but not her mother. Members of the church visit her daily, and have begun a campaign to get the government to allow her mother a visit to be with her dying 14 year old daughter.
- Pleasant Hill United Church of Christ in Tennessee has agreed to come together every Monday to pray for compassionate care at the border, and will do so until our immigration laws and policies change. The prayer vigil is called "Witness for Children."
- Recently, a very small church of about 25 members in Yuma AZ witnessed a busload of migrants dropped off at a local parking lot by immigration officers. Mostly women and children who spoke no English and had little money, the church organized overnight to take the families into their homes, feed them, and provide them with mobile phone service until they could contact friends and relatives who could take care of them.

The United Church of Christ has begun a campaign we call 'Three Great Loves.' They are the love of children, love of neighbor, and love of creation.

Every day on our website, we post stories of how our churches practice the kind of love that changes lives and changes the world. It would be a matter of great pride and true delight to us if the Churches in Germany were to join us in this effort. We are hopeful that these commitments to love will change the hearts and minds of leaders that are espousing fear and hatred. We are hopeful that the love we stand for every day, enacted in simple ways by merely loving our neighbor, will help the world overcome the rising tide of racism and xenophobia that is threatening to destroy us all. A great US President, Abraham Lincoln, once wrote "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

The America that Lincoln fought and died to hold together in unity is in danger of becoming a house so divided it can no longer stand. The United Church of Christ feels a great and urgent imperative to practice love in a way that re-establishes our long cherished unity as a people.

My pledge to you today, as I stand before our ancestors who helped not only build what is today the United Church of Christ, but who also made sure that when it was built it would be true to the gospel imperative to love one another as Christ first

loved us – my pledge is that in such a time as this, we will continue to extend God’s love for all in hopes that it will overcome the hate and fear that threaten to divide us.

To quote the US author Rob Bell, “love wins.”

I remember meeting Barb Munzel, a Presbyterian minister serving in the United States who spoke with a thick German accent. She was a child who grew up in Germany during the time of the Second World War. Her childhood home was adjacent to a Concentration Camp, separated only by a wall they could not see beyond. Her family was very poor. She remembers every day her grandmother taking a loaf of bread that was their meal for the day and dividing it so that each member of the family had the same amount. Barb then remembers her grandmother taking her own piece of bread, breaking it in half, and tossing the other half over the wall into the camp. She did this at great risk to her own well-being – an act of love and kindness that came at great risk but which led her granddaughter to spend her whole life committed to spreading that love everywhere she went.

If more of us committed ourselves to this kind of love—to be present in solidarity and to seek justice by amplifying the voices of those otherwise marginalized-- and teaching it again to our children; if we practice our faith as the antidote to the poison of hate and fear being espoused by the world’s rising fascism, love will win.

The United Church of Christ is doing what it can every day to make this happen. Won’t you join us?