

Let's take a quick look at the headlines this week. The Mueller Report. The criminal investigation of Boeing. College Admissions Scandals. Brexit. And the aftermath of the attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. What do all these things have in common? Exceptionalism.

Exceptionalism is our topic for today. Exceptionalism is the notion that someone – or often a community of someones – are somehow higher, more elevated, more refined, more special, more blessed – than everybody else.

Rather than strengthening a sense of interdependence and solidarity, an appeal to exceptionalism serves to reinforce barriers and divisions. To paraphrase St. Augustine, sin (and this is one) leads us to curve in on ourselves (naval gazing). Ideologies of exceptionalism, even in their most humanitarian forms, do just that. They blind us to the realities of others, particularly those at the margins. They blind us to our own failings in the past and reinforce hypocrisy in the present. And they blind us to the deeper motives of those who benefit from the status quo.

It's exceptionalism that would puff up a political leader to believe he is above the law and can make his own rules. It's exceptionalism that drives a company to put profits over safety and holds its breath, trusting it will be "too big to fail". It's exceptionalism that whispers in the ears of the wealthy and powerful that it's ok to rig the system, just a benefit of having made the big time.

As the UK takes a deep look at how it lives in relationship with the rest of Europe, and with the wider world, as it considers exiting the European Union, certainly the concept of exceptionalism is one that must be grappled with.

Here in the United States, we have our own brand... American Exceptionalism. Great libraries could be filled the works written on American Exceptionalism, tracing at least as far back as John Winthrop's famous "A Model of Christian Charity" sermon in 1630 during which he cast a vision for his fellow Massachusetts Bay colonists to embrace their role in establishing a "city upon a hill" – an image taken directly from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14). It received a descriptive vocabulary with Alexis de Tocqueville's observations in *Democracy in America*. And it took on new and deadly force with the Myth of Manifest Destiny, which was used to justify *both* the expansion of the American Empire following the US-Mexican and Spanish-American Wars and the violent domination of people of color domestically.

During the season of Lent, and as we approach our 350th Anniversary year, we have committed ourselves to the important work of deep introspection and repentance for some of the corporate and systemic sins that we really must face up to. Environmental Devastation, Racism, Patriarchy, and Sexism. Each of these is rooted in Exceptionalism. The notion that a particular group is somehow more important, more blessed, more entitled. Today we look at American Exceptionalism. In a moment we'll be reading a litany together, of repentance for Exceptionalism – and particularly American Exceptionalism. It is long, and it could have been so much longer. There is much to atone for.

But, I could not preach a sermon on exceptionalism without taking a moment to talk about Christian Exceptionalism. It is undeniable that for centuries the Christian Church, and nations that considered themselves part of Christendom, claimed a particular chosenness, a godliness, a perspective that viewed Christian society as civilized and everyone else as heathen. It was Christian Exceptionalism that launched the Crusades, that stoked the Spanish Inquisition, that justified chattel slavery and wars of conquest. While we know that Christianity has also inspired great good in the world, we have to reckon with the ways in which our religion has been twisted to justify evil.

When I was a youth – that is when I was in youth group – I had a prayer partner (Seany P) who made me a poster that I hung up over my bed. It had a beautiful rainbow, some butterfly stickers, and the last verse from today's reading. I read that line every night before going to sleep. It's one of the very few scriptures I have memorized. "Be strong and of good courage..." It is the thing I say to myself when I'm anxious or need to pluck up some courage. It means so much to me. And then I went to seminary. And read the verse in context.

In today's scripture lesson Joshua has just been handed the reigns and is the new leader of the Israelite People. He's stepping into Moses' sandals and after wandering in the wilderness for a generation they are on the verge of the Promised Land. And God speaks to Joshua, commissions him, blesses him, and promises "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. You shall put these people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them." The only problem is, this Canaan, this Promised Land was no more empty than America was when the indigenous people of this land discovered Columbus, hungry, sick and lost on their shore. Thus begins the chosen people's conquest of

the Promised Land. And they go on to establish a nation, a people, a religious tradition, the tradition into which Jesus was born.

We have to boldly face the past. Face the ways in which our national pride, and our religious tradition, have been used to justify warfare, the theft of land and resources, and the dehumanizing treatment of people we've viewed as "other". But how do we reconcile all this with our commitment to follow Jesus, the one who said love your neighbors – no exception? I've got two thoughts.

The first comes from that very verse in Joshua. "For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go." I'm fond of saying that God refuses to be put into any box. God is not located only in one temple, only accessible to the most holy or the most respectable. God's blessings are not upon only one nation, one people, one flock of believers. God is with you, whoever you are, wherever you go. And for us who believe in Jesus, we follow a Christ who promises, "Where two or more are gathered, I will be there." Christ is not just here. Christ is everywhere. Transcending all barriers. Showing up in even the most unlikely of places.

My second thought comes from the story of the Syrophenician Woman – do you remember that one. A woman comes to Jesus saying – please help, heal my daughter who is possessed by a demon and Jesus says – anyone remembers – does he say – you betcha, I'm on it. Nope, he says "Let the children first be fed, since it isn't good to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to the dogs!" Basically, he said, I'm here for the Jews, not for the Syrophenicians. Why should I give my healing power to someone who isn't a chosen one." But the woman says to him: "Sir, even the dogs under the table get to eat scraps dropped by children!" The woman stands up and reflects back to Jesus what he has just said. And Jesus – changes. Jesus gets over this ingrained – millennia ingrained – exceptionalism. He turns back to her (some might even say he repents) – and he heals her daughter immediately. Jesus knew the truth about exceptionalism. The last shall be first, the first shall be last. Love your neighbor as yourself, no exception.

Even Jesus, God incarnate, knows the power of repentance. Of turning things back around. We cannot change the past but we must face up to it. As James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." This is why the act of repentance is so important. We remember Samuel Sewall – who served as judge over the Salem Witch Trials when he was only 18 years old – who later came to recognize the Christian Exceptionalism that had turned his heart towards injustice and dehumanization – who stood before the

congregation of this church while a public confession was read aloud “to take the Blame and shame of it.” In Sewall, this act of confession and repentance made a change in him, and he was inspired to turn his life in a new direction, to fight for the abolition of slavery and to dismantle notions of exceptionalism that would name one group of people chosen and deny the dignity and humanity of others.

The other major headline in the news today is about the aftermath of the attacks on two Mosques in Christchurch New Zealand. We know the horrors of those attacks, the motivation – white supremacy, anti-Muslim hate – currently two of this nation’s top exports. While the pain of these tragedies cannot be erased, the work now must be to ensure that their suffering is not in vain. **We repent our part**, through our actions and inactions, in allowing anti-Muslim hate, white supremacy, and exceptionalism to continue in any corner of God’s creation. And we seek to turn back around and take direct action to address the harm done. By the way, there are at least four ways to undermine exceptionalism in your bulletin insert.

Repentance is an act of Hope that says things didn’t go as they should have, things aren’t as they could be, but healing is real. Transformation is real. Resurrection is real. Repentance is the thing that breaks us open and allows for the possibility of transformation, the transforming of our hearts, the transforming of the world. Through repentance, forgiveness is made real. Grace has more power. It is the calisthenics of our faith.