



Faith
AND FILM

GRAPES OF WRATH



EXPLORE IN WORSHIP: SUNDAY, JUNE 22nd | PREACHED BY REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

I'm glad to be back from part two of my sabbatical. Part three starts in July. I know it's a little confusing. Sabbatical is six months, but I decided to take it in two-month parts in order to see you and to check in with my staff and the board and especially the strategic planning team. So I am back here for a month. Part one was research in India and preaching in New Zealand. Part two, I call the clearing out phase. It was a 1,700-mile bicycle trip from the south end of the south island in New Zealand up to the north. I took some pictures to show you what it looked like. It took me a month, and a month on a bicycle alone traveling in unknown lands, following a route and being open to the elements and experiences is the way I clear out my mind.

People ask me if I write amazing sermons on these trips, to which I say, "I am only thinking of the next pedal stroke, the next hill, the next mile, and what I am going to find to eat." Needless to say, it was amazing to be on back country roads and dirt paths and small roads through vineyards in a country with only 5 million people. Astounding landscape it is. It renewed my soul. That's a picture with a timer just in case you were wondering. Wherever I went, everyone asked me, "So where are you from?" And I said, "Well, I'm from the US," and they wanted to talk about politics, and I started telling them I was from Canada. I've been back a couple weeks. We took a family trip to Washington state and to Vancouver Island, noticed some of these photos were taken in vineyards just for you. I'm happy to be back here with you. More concerned than ever about our country, trying to breathe the hot Texas air and trying to digest the hot air coming out of Washington.

And then this, my friend Jeff Sharlet, the author of *The Undertow: Slow Civil War*, who sat on this stage with me before the election, posted this photo on Saturday. It is a picture that he took in Dallas at the Christ of All Nations Institute, which if you drive down 35 at the split with 67, you will see, in our

beautiful landscape, this poster in a lobby of its founder, which says, if you can't read it, "Everyone ought to pray at least one violent prayer a day." This photograph Jeff took in March in the lobby of Christ for all Nations, he said, is where the person who murdered the politicians in Minnesota has claimed to be educated and entitled to use the title Dr. Vance Boelter, Security Expert.

Christ for all Nations claims on their website to be one of the world's leading nonprofit missions organizations that is transforming lives and influencing nations around the world. It states its core values that to live contrary or in conflict with the Holy Bible is a sin. And it claims to support and practice repentance according to the Holy Bible. Apparently that core value that Christians are keen on posting all throughout our public school systems that says "Thou shall not kill" has been given a hall pass by the Christ for all Nations. Turns out the Minnesota assassin had a list of Democrats and abortion providers he says supported murder and so deserved to be killed. The logic not only makes no sense, but I might remind him and others who are keen on justice through murder that this is a sin according to the Bible, a Bible that also says "Love thy neighbor."

Jeff wrote of this photo, "I stopped by the Christ for all Nations Institute because I was in Dallas to speak at a very different church, First Unitarian, which has a 60-year history of fighting for reproductive rights, and through volunteers continue to aid people seeking abortions making their way to other states. It stepped up for trans rights too. For my talk," he says, "The church hired off-duty cops as security because a church on the front lines of struggle for so long knows something about the violent prayers of others."

I read this and thought, "This is what I came back from the serene roads of New Zealand for?" And yes, I did. I did because I'm not afraid. At least for now, I am not worn down by the rhetoric, the hypocrisy, the BS. I am refreshed, even if that makes just one of us in this room today. And I've been trying to take the advice of Joy Harjo from her poem that we read today, calling back my spirit, calling it back with me from those serene rivers. "Turn off that cell phone and computer and remote control. Open the door, close it behind you. Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth gathering essences of plants to clean and give it back with gratitude."

What is she saying to us? Being wrapped up in the news of the hour, the next stupid thing said by the leader of this or another country, the constant haranguing and chatter on the sound of the TV in the background because we have to be informed, because we just can't help bite on every phrase and mistake said or done by someone we might just well ignore is not good for the soul.

I know it is difficult. I know especially when the truth is stranger than fiction it is difficult to turn off the computer and to close the door and breathe the friendly air that blows around the world. And now the start of another war, this time with a formidable enemy. I don't know how we're going to do this. What I do know is that not paying attention to any of this for me has been a luxury. I know. Rolling along wide, clean rivers and over mountain passes, just listening to my heartbeat, I know it is a luxury. I know there are people who can't ignore it, who are running scared for their lives from ICE agents and bombs falling on them directly related to our US government sale and industry and greed of arms.

And yet the poet says, "When you find your way to the circle, the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed. You must clean yourself and cut ties with failure and shame. Let go of the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, and all the way to your feet. Call upon those to help those who love you. Call your spirit back," she says. Good advice and hard work to do. Calling your spirit back from the precipice of fear and loathing seems the work of each of us these days. And in this church we call the spirit back in worship, in prayer, in song, and seeing these beautiful children in conversation and in community, not letting the truth of these times get whitewashed or ignored, holding the truth before us, but holding it as strong as we can be.

This week we celebrated the holiday commemorating the news of the emancipation from slavery finally arriving in Texas two years late, Juneteenth. When the White House made no plans to celebrate it, the president complained about people having too many days off, and then in the same week they removed the bust of Martin Luther King from the Oval Office, a bust that was made of bronze by the African American artist Charles Alston two years after King was assassinated. It was brought from the Portrait Gallery to the Oval Office by President Obama. On the heels of the president telling us the Confederate army base names would be restored and renewed fights with universities over diversity, equity, and inclusion, we here in the church closed the office, had a joyous day of Unitarian Camp with a couple hundred loving children and adults, and we watched the film *The Grapes of Wrath*. Admittedly, not a Black man or woman appeared in the film, but the story is about a displaced Oklahoma farm family chased by the police, lied to and paid less than a living wage, touched by the spirit of resistance and organizing. It all brought to mind the many struggles going on in America today.

It was a coincidence that last week, Bruce Springsteen and Joan Baez sang with a gospel choir to 50,000 people in a vigil at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, DC, the songs *We Shall Overcome* and the song *The Ghost of Tom Joad* with the gospel choir behind them. Tom Joad, the main character in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the song quotes his famous concluding speech to his mother after he has seen the light shown to him by a former preacher, Casy, who has told him in one way or another that our job is to stand up for one another, to make paths that point out the absurdity of how so few have so much and how so many have so little. And the song says, "Tom said, 'Mom, wherever there's a cop beating a guy, wherever a hungry newborn cries, wherever there's a fight against the blood and hatred in the air, look for me, Mom. I'll be there. Wherever somebody's fighting for a place to stand or a decent job or a helping hand, wherever somebody's struggling to be free, look in their eyes, Ma, and you'll see me.'"

Social media lit up with the whispers of Bruce Springsteen who said to Joan Baez, "America is hurting, but your voice heals us." And they both told the crowd, the vigil crowd who held candles and had tears in their eyes about what all is going on, "You are our hope. We will rise again." Honestly, we could be more involved in Juneteenth, but I think we had something right watching a film set in the '30s when nothing was right for working people, watching it today when things just aren't right for so many people. *Grapes of Wrath* was set by Steinbeck as a political fiction designed to show the terrible human cost of the callous capitalist policies that allowed people to be exploited and starved, pushed

off their land and hounded. *Grapes of Wrath*, if you haven't seen the film, you're going home today and you're watching the film is about a family, a migrant family, the Joad family traveling and suffering westward to California to pick peaches and cotton, live in shanty towns. They are symbols of the hundreds of thousands of other migrants who made that journey.

Along the way, they are threatened and robbed and scorned and beaten and taken advantage of and in so many ways, mostly by their own countrymen who have come to view these Okies as outsiders and reds arriving not to work honestly and build better lives for themselves, but in echoes of the modern day scaremongering to take what doesn't belong to them and to upset the order of things with labor unions and communism. Steinbeck said when he wrote this book, "I wanted to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for the depression and the plight of the workers." Steinbeck said that the way that people were being treated, the people leaving Oklahoma, the people who are your relatives, many of you, who left and went to look for work, they were called migrants in their own country.

He said, "In the west there was panic when the migrants multiplied on the highways. Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns and soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders were bad as a man must do before he fights," Steinbeck wrote. They said, "These goddamn Okies are dirty and ignorant. These degenerate maniacs are... We're here to defend our people. They bring disease. They are filthy. We can't have them in our schools. They are strangers," wrote Steinbeck.

"The local people whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty," Steinbeck said. "Then they formed units and squads and armed them. 'We can't let these Okies get out of hand,' they said. And the men who were armed did not own the land, but they thought they did." Sound familiar, America? The film is ripe for us today to see in the eyes of the hungry, the struggles. What the film does also beyond pointing out what it is like to lose everything to live in poverty, is to ask a question that I have been struggling with, which is, how do we treat people who commit acts of violence and evil as if they are part of us, as if they are members of our communities, our family? How do we treat them without prejudice or hatred, even when it is directed at us and those we love?

The question is a tireless one. It is about the connection between us. It is echoed in Emerson's *Over-Soul* and articulated by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh who said, "You are me and I am you. Isn't that obvious that we inter-are? You cultivate the flower in yourself so I will be beautiful. I transform the garbage in myself so that you will not have to suffer. I support you, you support me. I am in this world to offer you peace. You are in this world to bring me joy." And he's not just talking about the people we agree with or sit in church with. And this is harder and harder to live with, this idea that we inter-are, especially with the people who commit evil, but important nonetheless.

And the *Grapes of Wrath*, for some of the characters the story is about faith and the loss of faith and how we can see our connections beyond division. This one thread is about a preacher who becomes a

labor organizer who sees Christ in others, even the people who come at him with the bats and the shovels, sees in them God. It is a lesson to us about the core of Christian theology, love thy neighbor, and thou shall not kill. It asks us how we can see each other, all of us, as family, part of God's soul, and if not with love, then with acknowledgement of our shared humanity. Difficult to do.

A man turns his violent prayer into a shooting spree and I struggle to see myself in him. A president launches the world into war and I struggle to acknowledge his humanity. But these things are evident in the lessons of *Grapes of Wrath* that we revisited this week. In Tom's speech, which is in the song, which is in the film, and in the book, he says, the Preacher Casy, who always in the film keeps saying, "I'm no longer a preacher because I just don't know." And I felt a lot like him. But Tom is on the run from the police and he gives this farewell speech to his mother. His words go like this.

He says, "Well, Mom, maybe like Casy says, a fellow ain't got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one." "And then what, Tom?" she says. "And then it don't matter. Then I'll be around in the dark. I'll be everywhere. Wherever you look, wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know suppers ready. And when our folks eat stuff they raise and live in the houses they build, I'll be there. See?"

This speech comes straight out of Unitarian Transcendentalism and Emerson's essay, the *Over-Soul* who says, "When we finally understand that at some level the souls of all people are connected, the precise manner," he says, "the degree to this connection is not spelled out, but when we finally realize that we are all part of something connected, something that is soul, we will achieve something spiritually important. When we see that the soul is created by and has existence that is similar to God or that God exists within humans, all humans, we will approach something like salvation," he says.

Easy for Emerson to say. He didn't have to watch CNN and the endless reviews of what kind of person shoots a civil servant and has a list of abortion providers he wants to kill because he is so against killing. He didn't have to watch the President of the United States insulting people on Twitter, right? But he did live in a world of slavery, and he did live in a world where western expansion meant the massacre of indigenous people. And he did live in a world that was rapidly industrializing. He did believe with all his heart that all people are part of a bigger soul, and that we have to act on that. Honestly, to live like that is hard. It's hard just watching the news and feeling that. It's especially hard when someone's standing over you with a billy club or praying a violent prayer for your demise.

But nonetheless, it is important to keep our spiritual view on these truths because if we don't, who will? The real chaos ensues if we give up hope on each other, if we hide in fear rather than work to create brave space for others and ourselves, if we give up pondering our shared fate on this globe. The real chaos ensues. If we don't find ways to renew our spirit, to come back ready to rise and fight and give one another a chance. I know it's hard these days. I know. I know it's difficult even to have a little hope. But I also know that Ma Joad's last speech in *The Grapes* is true.

Ma is the best character in this film. She's been treated poorly and without dignity and called names and had to watch as they buried her family and land that was not their own. She has worried over her children. Even at one point she says, "Our family is over." And yet Ma's last words in the film remind us that beyond the ultimate connection that Tom Joad has seen and understood, what is important is not giving up. She is showing us and telling us that if we are united, we do not fall. Ma says very clearly while they bump down the road to the next orchard and the next potential job and Pa laments all the challenges they have faced, she says this, "Rich fellas, they come up and they die and their kids ain't no good and they die out too. But we keep 'a coming," she says. "We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever 'cause we're the people." And the poet and the people and the rock stars at the Lincoln Monument and all of us say amen to that.

And Joy Harjo, whose people were marched to death, cast into unwanted lands, poisoned with disease and burned in their dwelling places by the ancestors of the people who would read her poems, whose name is Joy and calls us to a higher view of life, from the poet's mouth to our ears, from the depths of my sabbatical renewal, from the hope that we will survive all this insanity right now, she says, "Your spirit will need to sleep a while, that's for sure. Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place to go. And make a giveaway. Make a giveaway of your life." She does say, "Keep the speeches short." I blanked on that one today. But then she importantly says, "Then you must do this. Help the next person find their way through the dark."

They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us because we'll go on forever because we're the people. We know we have to try to keep seeing one another as ourselves. We have to keep praying nonviolent prayers. We have to rest and renew and return to invite others to a giveaway of whatever we can give. And ultimately, our work is to help the next person find their way through the dark. We can and we will because we are the people. Amen and amen.