With the global resurgence of nationalistic and demagogic public sentiment dominating headlines, one may wonder about the role that “chosen-ness” has played in the unfolding of recent history. While, historically, resentment of the “Chosen People” may have enabled the Nazi regime to employ demagoguery to fuel a rise to power, another notion of the chosen-ness emerged into popular consciousness, that of a superior Aryan nation. The impact of using ethnocentrism to divide, suppress, and exterminate dissenters was immortalized in the poem by German pastor Martin Niemöller entitled “First they came...” The narrator of the poem laments how after ignoring the demonization and captivity of minority groups, there was no one left to step up and defend him once the finger of the demagoguery was pointed in his direction. The poem was particularly directed towards German Christians who complacently embraced an identity isolated from marginalized groups. The message was that complacency in the face of demagoguery is equivalent to complicity in the eradication of one’s own group. After the Holocaust, Germany adopted laws against Volksverhetzung, or incitement to hatred against ethnic groups, and criminalized demagoguery and public displays of Nazi symbols.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near” is God’s invitation to grace, from the first of this Sunday’s first readings. Knowledge of the accessibility of God’s grace can be so comforting that it appears to be the lone privilege of a chosen people who escaped the idolatry of their Babylonian and Egyptian captivity for a privileged position in God’s mind. But is “chosen-ness” so comforting as to breed complacency in those who view themselves as members of that nation? Isaiah, seems to be saying that accessibility to God’s grace is as unpredictable as the mind of God itself. But what does it mean when God is not near or cannot be found? Where does one find God in the horrors of the Holocaust? Perhaps Isaiah’s words may better serve as a stern warning for those Christians who respond to grace less with entreaty and more with complacency. Such Christians allowed slave labor to build America.

With chants of “blood and soil,” white proponents of an Aryan Nation recently united in Charlottesville, VA with proponents of the pro-slavery Confederacy by invoking a superior identity tied primarily to the past. Responding to a call to “Unite the Right,” they carried torches and publicly rallied around a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee set for removal. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (who tracks terrorist groups in the South), most such monuments were erected during the Jim Crow era (after black Americans lost their voting rights) and in almost direct response to turning points in the struggle for American black liberation. This statue in Emancipation Park, on Jefferson Street, in the home town of the man
who wrote “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” was commissioned exactly 100 years before its recent removal. Considering that the personal conviction of the lead General of the pro-slavery, anti-Union Confederacy was that such monuments might add to “the difficulties under which the Southern People labor,” the statue’s symbolism was volatile. National attitudes toward such monuments shifted dramatically when a member of the rally ran over a crowd of counter-protestors injuring dozens and murdering Heather Heyer. In a call to extend statue removal nationwide, North Carolina NAACP president Rev. William Barber cautioned, “If you pull down the statue but you do not pull down the statutes, the laws that support them, we still have issues.” Beyond the immediate concern over existing Confederate statues, Barber was advocating the dismantling of American white hegemony. This prevailing dominance of white social groups is symbolized by monuments, reinforced by economic structures and calcified by laws. To dismantle the idol that is white hegemony requires more than adrenaline and a sledgehammer. It requires lifelong spiritual commitment, it rejects complacency, and it demands acceptance of a transcendent identity and common struggle.

In Sunday’s second reading, Paul implores that Christians commit to conduct ourselves “in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The identity he appeals to is beyond mere blood and soil. To Paul “the flesh” itself can be an idol if it implies disconnection from the body of Christ. The inviolable sanctity of skin in white supremacist circles (as evidenced by historical prohibitions against “miscegenation”) is a clear indication of that idolatry in practice. Yet, in accepting that Christ will be magnified in his body “by life or by death” he is embracing an identity that transcends flesh through death. The kenosis, or self-emptying, that Paul hints at is a living death where the labor of the flesh is destined to be fruitful because it is directed by Christ’s will. Unless this sounds like a monumental level of self-sacrifice, then we likely have not yet realized demanding nature of Gospel worthiness. We may not grasp the notion of a common struggle.

Labor in the kingdom of Heaven is fruitful, but material reward is not the motivating factor for common struggle. Christian self-sacrifice is the realization of the laborers in the vineyard in Sunday’s Gospel parable. Those laborers who were chosen first discovered that, in the kingdom of heaven, all who are chosen will receive the same daily wage. In grumbling enviously for being made equal to all other laborers, the first laborers reveal an assumption that underlies their chosen-ness: God does not keep a clock or play favorites. Their resentment reveals that they have yet to appreciate what it means to have not been chosen. When Jesus says, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first,” the parable’s meaning could certainly be directed toward historic Jewish people for whom the cultural Jewish heritage was an impediment to their appreciation of Jesus’ novel teachings, yet it may extend further to the spiritual underpinning of racism to us. Both the romanticism of the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy” and the “blood and soil” racialism of the Aryan nation have made idols of the flesh and past stories. While it has certainly become easier to recite a script denouncing racist violence and disunity of known hate groups, gospel worthiness requires an examination of the present. Are we seeking the will of the Lord in the here and now, and if so, what stories about flesh and the past are connected to violence and disunity in our lives? Are we empty enough for Christ to be magnified in us, or is our body still bound to blood and soil? Do we believe that our own labor can be fruitful in
dismantling white hegemony, or is complacency holding us back? If like Paul, we feel caught between two lives, Christ asks us to labor with those whose lives have been deemed less equal and are threatened daily by the idolatry of white resentment. The fruits are ours to share.

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