

**CHURCH OF THE SERVANT**  
**Lenten Series, 2018**  
**Soul Mending in a Torn World**  
**Part I: Our World Seems to be Coming Apart!**

What is your story? By this I mean, what is the narrative of your life? What is foundational to your sense of wellbeing in the world?

I don't know about you, but I don't consciously think about these things very much – except in my quiet time early in the morning in front of the fireplace. That can be scary. Because when I am all alone, with only the light of the fireplace, I ask ultimate questions in my mind – questions like, “Why am I here? What is life all about? Am I making a difference in my world?” In the words of our Methodist founder, John Wesley, “Am I doing all the good I can, in all the ways that I can, for as many people as I can?”

Another way of asking this is, “What is my place in the world?”

So, I go pour myself a second cup of coffee and turn on CNN or Fox News so I can be cheered on by all the good things that are coming out of Washington, DC. That always warms my soul.

Sometimes I think about our youth, the college and university students that I have taught for 40 years. Then I really am an old man. I remember the words of Socrates:

“The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise.” **Socrates** (470-339 BC)

But then, in all honesty, I have to ask myself: “What kind of world are we passing on to the next generation?”

Suddenly, it dawns on me that the current state of our society is a thing we are passing on to our children and grandchildren – not something **they** have created to punish us for being perfect parents and grandparents. How has it come to be that what we are passing on may not be as good as the society we inherited?

This morning, let's start with what we can **know** with some certainty, and I will suggest also what these things might mean. As far as things “known,” we will concern ourselves only with the last half-century trends, changes, and events.

***Christian Identity in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

As a theologian and church historian, I choose to begin with what it means to be a Christian in America – and this with specific reference to my identity as a theologian. I am a bit weird in this respect. I grew up in the Wesleyan Tradition

Church of the Nazarene – educated at Nazarene institutions of higher education. That is not the weird part. The weird part is that in the late 1980s I read the UM Book of Discipline for the very first time, and I decided to join the Methodists – hence my coming on staff at Servant in the early 1990s. Do you not find this weird? How many of you joined the Methodist Church because you read the Book of Discipline before even attending the church for the very first time? See, I am weird.

As a Wesleyan theologian, adopted and enthusiastically welcomed into the United Methodist fold, I identified myself as an “evangelical” Wesleyan. My theological identity is now threatened in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century because the identifying marker as an “evangelical” is being taken away. That good word has been prostituted by politics of a very specific variety.

My PLACE in the world as an evangelical Christian, as an evangelical theologian, is being taken away, and that wears on my soul. It makes me spiritually weary.

Over the years, I became accustomed to explaining to the historically unenlightened that an evangelical was not a Fundamentalist – mainly because a typical Fundamentalist reads the Bible as a source book for facts (like the earth can’t possibly be any more than about 5000 years old because that is what you get when you add up all the generations listed in the genealogy tablets in scripture.) Whereas, Wesleyan Christians read the Bible to discern the way of salvation, not to find out how old the earth and universe are. Consult the Book of Discipline, Article V: “The Sufficiency of Scripture for our Salvation.” [Some day I will give a talk on why one cannot **consistently** be a Fundamentalist and a Methodist!]

Tonight, when you are lying in bed unable to sleep because you are worrying about this, remember that Methodism began as a renewal movement in the Church of England – with a specific focus on personal salvation – and all such renewal movements since the Reformation in 1517 have been typically described as evangelical. Evangelicals were people concerned with personal piety, godliness, and the transformation of the world in preparation for God’s final transformation. That identifying marker has been, in less than a single generation, been swept away in a cloud of political rhetoric – aided and abetted by Facebook, Twitter, and the so-called evening ‘News.’

The word ‘evangelical’ is now the identifying characteristic for a relatively small group of people who hold a specific political stance and who vote a specific way. The word connotes a theological void in which politicians are our saviors and economic policy defines kingdom. This scenario is doubly sad for me as a publicly professed evangelical theologian because I am also a life-long member of the Republican party. With some deep existential anguish, I find myself identifying with the widely circulated

editorial by Peter Wehner (who served US presidents in the previous three Republican administrations), “Why I Can No Longer Call Myself an Evangelical Republican.”

Words matter, and how we use words matters. The biggest lie we were every told as children is: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” In a recent survey of the under-30 generation, the synonym for ‘an evangelical’ chosen 40% of the time was “hypocrite.” I can still be a Republican, but I get a condescending smile if I say I am a “moderate republican,” but I can no longer say that I am an “evangelical Republican.” I can’t explain my way out of that one.

The political prostitution of the word “evangelical” that has a 500-year long respectable lineage disturbs me. It is only a single thread in the fabric of my life, but it is an important one. The root of evangelical is evangel = Gospel: the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. The next time you hear the word evangelical on the news, read it in the paper, or see it in a text or tweet, listen to discern whether you hear overtones (or any tone) about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let me know if you do!! I need the encouragement with regard to the direction of our rhetoric-driven society.

Please note carefully: My concern here is not about political party identity, it is about confused identity in our society. I fear that the word “evangelical” is lost forever as a theological word in North American society. It has become a political label, and as an evangelical Christian theologian, that bothers me. For 40 years I would explain that I am an evangelical, but not a Fundamentalist. Now, as an evangelical, I am a Fundamentalist no matter what I say.

### **Perpetually Disoriented, Blinded by Nostalgia**

To get at what I mean by this, I quote former White House advisor and Hertog Fellow at the Center for Ethics and Public Policy, Yuval Levin. As we hear his words, we catch a glimpse of why we feel worn and torn – whipsawed as we are between alternative narratives about the public good.

*The first decade and a half of the twenty-first century has been a frustrating time for Americans. Opinion polls and election results attest to exceptional levels of pessimism and unease. We have not been happy with the state of our economy, our politics, and our culture – or, in other words, with our common public life. [It is difficult for us as individuals to find peace in our soul when our common public life is a mess.]*

Part of this is economics. *Our economy has been sluggish since the century began, and not only during the economic crisis and recession of 2008-2009. The country’s **strongest** year of economic performance in the twenty-first century so far, 2004, saw a level of growth (3.8) that barely reached the **average** of the prior four (4) decades.*

[But economics was not the worst of it. Do you remember 9/11]? *The century began with the worst terrorist attack in American history, which shattered our hope for a*

*peaceful post—Cold War world. The globe has since stumbled from one perilous crisis to another, with no real prospect of a stable order yet in sight.*

*[Whether about the threat about Islamic extremists or other ‘foreign invaders’], our politics have been polarized and intensely divisive: . . . from stem cells to marriage preference, religious liberty to national identity, our cultural warfare has been at a fever pitch that has left all sides feeling besieged and offended. [If you do not feel worn and torn, then you must have just arrived on our planet.]*

*Some key indicators that cross economics, culture, and politics—such as family breakdown and economic inequality—have also persistently pointed undermined any sense of wellbeing among a huge portion of our society. The socially and educationally disadvantaged are entrenched in poverty cycles and low mobility that turn the lights out on any hope for improving their lot in life. [And this is not just about racial minorities and immigrants. For the first time since the Great Depressions, wage-earning Anglos feel that their future is not as bright economically as was their parents. For many the ‘American dream’ is dying.]*

*Our problems are real, but the ways in which we discuss them often seem disconnected from reality, so that the diagnoses attempted by politicians, journalists, academics, and analysts have tended only to contribute to a marked disorientation in public life. We have tended to understand our era not so much as a **transition** as an **aberration**, so that we have spent the last decade and more waiting for a return to “normal” that has refused to come. The reason it never comes is because it never **was**.*

*The political system has shared in this tendency and reinforced it. The Right and Left alike have seen the challenges of this century as consequences of our abandoning a favored path that once served us well – though, of course, they are in disagreement about just what that path involved. Republican and Democrat alike have each portrayed our country as the victim of malicious interruption perpetrated by the other, and each has seen the challenges of this century as reason to double down on its own long-standing agenda rather than for trying to apply enduring principles to novel circumstances.*

*Democrats talk about public policy as though it were always 1965 and the model of the Great Society welfare state will answer our every concern. And Republicans talk as though it were always 1983 and a repetition of the Reagan Revolution is the cure what ails us. It is hardly surprising that the American public finds the resulting political debates to be frustrating . . . . Only the die-hard few on either side of the aisle are convinced. Voters can sense as a general matter that the politicians’ diagnoses are wrong, and that their prescriptions are therefore deficient.*

*This suspicion has given us the feeling that our politics has become inept and rudderless, which drives a further loss of faith in leaders and institutions—and even*

*greater frustration with how things are changing [or not] and how our country just doesn't seem to function as well as it used to. Hence our nostalgia. For twenty years we have been drowning in nostalgia. [We are like a collection of children remember Christmas of our childhood.] And the particular form that our nostalgia has taken renders us incompetent [to imagine a different future], or at least badly confused [as to what that future might look like.]*

As long as we are lost in the nostalgia for what used to be, even if it never was, we are looking back and not looking forward. Our spirits and souls are locked up in a circular reminiscence that has us chained to our past.

In reference to our divine calling the Apostle Paul has some appropriate words for us in regard to our collective future: "Forgetting that which is behind, I press forward to the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Phillipians 3)." We are like the Israelites in the wilderness wishing they could go back to Egypt. Nostalgia for the past is a horribly distorted lens through which to look into the possibilities of the future. Looking back is not the way to go forward.

Nostalgia for a bygone era disables our ability to see a new and different future, and this one thing is certain. *We are living in a time of rapid change; a time that is as much a beginning as it is an end. But we will only be able to think clearly about what is beginning, and about how we can make the most of it, if we can pull ourselves away from lamentations for a lost youth or a bygone era.* In the words of the prophet Micah, our old men must dream dreams and our young see visions. Something new can emerge only if we as a people can get in touch with our soul. It is there that our best selves reside - for us as a society and for each of us as Pilgrims on a Christian journey.

We are now in the Season of Lent, and we must remember:  
The Christian Faith is an Easter Faith – always looking forward.

### ***E pluribus Unum*** Turned Inside Out

"Out of Many One" has now become, "Out of one MANY." The ideal of unity of purpose and vision has always been just that – an ideal. It was a future pulling us forward. What we seem to have now are competing visions of the past that have us looking backward. Our society is increasingly privatized and individualized, and a common social good increasingly is taking a back seat.

For the past quarter century, each President of the US has had a limited edition, commemorative coin struck to gift to service members in recognition of special meritorious service to the country. For example, George W. Bush's coin had the

presidential seal on the front and the White House on the flip side, with his name above it. It has no personal signature and it was of a similar size to previous coins.

At the end of 2017, President Trump released images of the new “Presidential Coin.” On the new coin, **E pluribus unum** has been replaced with the slogan, “Make America Great Again,” and Trump’s signature is on the front of the coin. Stylistic changes to the coin also reflect the larger than life persona Mr. Trump, people will differ on how they feel about those changes.

The drift from common good, reflected in the deletion of **E pluribus unum**, is also reflected in the suggestion from the White House that the coin may soon be handed out to campaign donors to the political party in addition to service members recognized for meritorious service to the country.

On the surface, this is a very small thing. Obviously, the president can give his coin to whomever he chooses. To lose sight of **E pluribus unum** on the presidential seal is not a small matter. It has appeared on American coinage since the late 1700’s.

Indeed, western civilization is rooted in the lineage of this phrase. It is likely that the phrase is rooted in Cicero’s paraphrase of Pythagoras in his **De Officiis**, as part of his discussion of basic family and social bonds as the origin of societies and states: “When each person loves the other as much as himself, it makes one out of many, as Pythagoras wishes things to be in friendship.” [Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *De Officiis*. Liber I, Caput XVII]

Before we open for discussion, I wish to mention one other thing that wears on my soul.

### **The Economics of our Future**

How many of you have seen either the stage play or the movie production of **Les Misérables**? Of course, our word “miserable” is derived from the same Latin word, **miserabilis**. In popular English parlance, this connotes words like unhappy, sad, sorrowful, dejected – basically words about our feelings.

If you have seen the play or the movie, you will know that these words about feelings miss the deep substantive point of the story. It is about a French population that is miserable in a pitiable state of distress and unhappiness due to deprivation, want, and shame. They are a people without hope. And people who have no hope do desperate things.

I reference again the sentiment of the 20- and 30-somethings of the Anglo working class in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who feel that their economic future is not as bright as that of their parents and grandparents when they were the same age. Sociologists tell us that this is a “first” in the history of modern North America. It would be too much to say that they are miserable and hopeless, but it is also not an exaggeration to say that the American dream of economic prosperity is not alive and well for a huge portion of our society.

The comedian George Carlin gets big laughs from his line: “The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it.”

It has been my privilege to live for extended periods of time in England, Germany, Holland, and Switzerland. From this I discerned that we Americans are among the most optimistic people in the world. The ‘can do’ attitude seems to be fundamental to being an American. The other part of my living abroad for so many years is that I realized that for the most part, “I am proud to be an American.”

At times, I have been not so proud. I just finished reading the book by Jim Dent, *The Kids got it Right* (2013). It is basically the story of Jerry LeVias, from my home town of Beaumont, Texas being recruited as the first black man to play football in the old SWC. Until Hayden Fry recruited LeVias, that had been an iron clad ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement’ in the SWC not to recruit black players. Just prior to this, Bud Wilkinson had bolted the establishment and recruited Prentice Gautt to Oklahoma. Reading Dent’s book took some shine off my idealistic memory of Darrell Royal at Texas and Gene Stallings at A&M, when I realized that they were among the ‘Gentlemen’ who knowingly participated in the agreement. Here it is important that I confess: I have to guard every day of my life against attitudes of prejudice that creep just below the surface and leak out altogether all too often.

I have at least a modicum of control over my personal participation in racism, but that is not my point of concern here as a final note on big things that wear my soul. In closing let’s at least note that we are in danger in our society in connection with economic inequality as well as remnants of racial inequality.

The first year that I was a college president, I was amazed to get an unannounced pay raise in the early part of the summer. I went to the CFO and asked why I got a 7+% pay raise. He smiled and explained that I did not get a raise, but that I had paid in ally my Social Security for the year. Since my president’s salary was triple what my professor’s

salary had been, I wondered why I was getting this break when I needed it a lot more before. Indeed, I could not honestly say that I needed it.

On a foundation board on which I serve, was visiting with a fellow board member about this. His salary at his company was triple what my salary was as a small college president, so he got his “raise” every February. He told me that had a lottery at their company for a money prize to the person who could guess when their CEO had fulfilled all his Social Security payment for the year. You had to guess it to the closest without ‘going over’ on the date. Actually, it is not just the day. It is not the hour of the day, and the minute of the day. It is now the second of the hour on the first day of January each year.

Is it not a supreme irony, that when I earned enough annual salary that the trajectory of that salary meant that I was rather secure financially, that at the juncture I was required to pay less into the well-being of our society as a whole. Honest to God, I remembered my Granny Gunter who lived solely off her Social Security for the last 30 years of her life. In The Acts of the Apostles, 4:32-34, we read these words:

*32. Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. 33. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds if what was sold and laid it at the Apostles feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.*

This is what we actually know about economic inequality. The gap has been getting wider at a rate we can hardly believe, even when we see it statistically set out. Last year a survey of 55,000 people asked about perceptions of income inequality related to the pay gap between corporate CEOs and unskilled workers. They they were asked how much a CEO should earn. “The median American estimated that the CEO-to-worker pay-ratio was 30-to-1, and that ideally, it’d be 7-to-1. The reality? 354-to-1. Fifty years ago, it was 20-to-1.”

I am not an economist, but I have read a few hundred pages that try to unpack all this in connection with its social implications for American society. This is what we do know. Our American optimism has 9 lives, and it refuses to die. The Pew Research Center tells us that only 5% of Americans see this economic gap as a problem for our society, fully

60% believe that one can achieve economic middle class status “if you work hard.” What we miss is the reality is that the “middle” no longer really exists:

“The top 20% of US households own more than 84% of the wealth, and the bottom 40% combine for a paltry 0.3%.”

This means that the ‘middle class’ possesses less than 15% of our nation’s wealth. That is a pretty small middle class.

The extended Walton family of Wal-Mart fame, for example, has more wealth than the lower economic 42% of American families combined.” Since one of the Walton family members is a donor with whom I have had the privilege to work and visit in their home, this is very liberating.

When they promise to give \$65m, I do not have to be afraid that they are going to miss a meal. That is a real number and this is a real donation promise.

All humor aside, the comedian Chris Rock had this to say about income inequality in America: ““Oh, people don’t even know. If poor people knew how rich rich people really are, there would be riots in the streets.” The findings of three studies, published over the last several years in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, suggest that Rock is right. We have no idea how unequal our society has become.

I have to personally confess that until recently I was not really aware of the disparity.

As a society, we are not listening, but social scientists are telling us that economic disparity is the number one social issue of short range urgent immediacy for our society. We simply refuse to believe that *Les Misérables* could play itself out in our society. Actually, if we look at 2016 political rallies, maybe this is not so far-fetched. There are a lot of really angry people in our world.

## Conclusion

**My conclusion this morning is very simple. I do not have a solution to any of this. But that does not keep these things from wearing on my soul.**

- 1. It wears on my soul that Christian Evangelicalism is being turned into a political caucus. Politics is becoming EVERYTHING.**
- 2. It wears on my soul that we are increasingly a separated society yearning nostalgically for a by-gone era rather than leaning into God’s future. Even more worrying is our growing tendency to demonize those whose vision of the lost golden age differs from ours. My God forgive our ‘warring spirit.’**
- 3. It wears on my soul that we keep insisting that people should lift themselves up by their own bootstraps when their shoe laces are broken.**

**EVEN AMID THESE CLOUDED CIRCUMSTANCES, EARLY IN THE MORNING IN FRONT OF MY FIREPLACE, I DISCERN ANEW MY PLACE.**

- 1. FIRST, I AM REMINDED THAT IT IS GOD'S WORLD, NOT MINE.**
- 2. SECOND, I AM REMINDED THAT I BELONG ULTIMATELY TO GOD.**
- 3. THIRD, I REALIZE THAT TENDING FOR MY SOUL IS MY RESPONSIBILITY.**
- 4. FOURTH, I REMIND MYSELF THAT MY CHRISTIAN CALLING IS TO BE A FORCE FOR GOOD, TO DO GOD'S WORK IN THE WORLD – REGARDLESS OF THE POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES THAT THREATEN TO UNDO US.**

**IT IS ONLY IN THAT PERSPECTIVE THAT I CAN EVER SO FAINTLY DISCERN MY PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE. SO NEXT TIME, WE WILL LOOK AT 'SOUL-MENDING'.**