

Moral Crisis

Gerti Garner

4th Sunday after Epiphany

February 1, 2026

Do you hear a thread in today's readings?

God loves us no matter what, especially those who are marginalized.

God comes back to us when we have turned away.

God frequently shows us how we are expected to live and treat one another.

God sent Jesus to teach us.

Jesus spread the word and then equipped the disciples to spread the word beyond Israel.

Jesus lived in a time of oppression that eventually was overcome. Unfortunately, it happened again and again over the millennia. That is what we are experiencing in America today. If only people would do as God asks. Why are there still times when many more people are NOT doing what God asks and oppressing others?

I believe that we are in serious danger of losing our democracy. There are many people who are working diligently to prevent that. In the last few weeks, opposition has greatly increased. Many voices, at all levels, have spoken out against actions of the administration. Sadly, today we are a divided nation. And we need to discern what we are called to do. This is not a time to sit quietly and hope it all works itself out.

I believe we are called to engage in the public square. God will be with us in our engagement. I believe that all of us would like to have peace in our neighborhoods and laws obeyed.

But what does that mean? Each of us should do what we can: pray, write letters, volunteer to bring food, offer rides, show up for protests – which really matter – especially if they grow from time to time. If you need help finding what needs to be done, ask someone.

I am not asking anyone to do what they cannot. I am sure that everyone is doing what they can. Thank you and please keep it up. If you can, make it a higher priority.

My question is what are we called to do when the work is done? If we rebuild what we had and don't look at the cause of what we have today, it will rise up again. Can we find a way that heals the wounds that trigger the quest for power and domination?

First, we need to figure out how we got here. I think one of the reasons we are in this situation is that there has been a moral collapse in our society. We only need to look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observations of how things unfolded in Germany nearly a century ago. Persecution of Jews happened over time in small increments – losing jobs, restrictions on movement, social ostracism, and later the genocide. The Christians didn't oppose those incremental changes. By the time the full scheme had unfolded, many individuals found themselves locked into the system.

Historians have seen that once a person takes an initial step of compliance, such as joining a professional organization that excludes Jews, the person enters into a new psychological situation. With each step that the person makes, they are changed and it creates a further need to justify what they had already done. Over time this erodes morality. When enough people make enough changes we end up in a moral crisis.

Tripp Fuller is a pastor, theologian and podcaster of Homebrewed Christianity. Recently he did a podcast in which he described the events that brought some white evangelicals and some Christians together in politics during 1973. Then he enumerated significant points between 1973 to now. An example of the kinds of points he discussed was data from PRRI, the Public Religion Research Institute.

In 2011, 30% of all white evangelicals were likely to accept immoral leaders. In 2016, 72% of all white evangelicals were most likely to accept immoral leaders. In five years, the data flipped! But we have all experienced how scandals of the past are nothing compared to what it takes for the media to call something a scandal today. In 2016, when Donald Trump was caught saying how easy it was to assault a woman, I was absolutely sure he had no chance of winning the election. Clearly, I was wrong.

Ten years later we are on the brink of fascism. Yet we cannot blame him alone. There are many individuals between 1973 and 2026, who have responsibility.

Another question we need to answer is how have our systems helped fuel this trend? Walter Wink wrote his book *The Powers that Be* in 1998. He wrote in his preface, “This book is in large part a digest of the third volume of my trilogy on the Powers: *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*.” He wrote that book in 1992 and other related books at least as far back 1984. We had a book study on *The Powers that Be* last year. I highly recommend the book as it is very helpful in answering the question and how to rebuild our systems.

We need to consider how to restore the morality of America. How do we do that? That is a difficult question to answer. Partly because there is no list of morals to which everyone has agreed. Characteristics frequently listed are honesty, respect, responsibility, compassion, fairness, justice, integrity, perseverance, kindness, and so forth.

The list goes on. . . however, we can look inward, as Father Rob often invites us to do. Can we distinguish between compromise and complicity as it seems that some evangelicals have done? Have we ever been complicit? We need to be aware when we are making that choice.

Do we hold our elected officials to account? Democracy means that elected officials are representatives of the people; they are not overlords. Have we been adequately engaged in our government?

Will we do these things to the best of our ability with love and care for everyone? Even those who have rained this horror on us?

These are the things we are called to do, as our Episcopal baptismal vows require us to treat everyone with respect. The only way forward to a lasting peace is to love as God loves us and create a society in which all people are whole.