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Texts: Isaiah 58: 1, 6-9; Jeremiah 20: 9  
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### “A Sublime Madness”

One of the sharpest minds the United States has ever produced happened to be a minister, a theologian, and a social theorist in the denomination to which we belong - the United Church of Christ. I’m speaking about Reinhold Niebuhr, who began as a parish minister in Detroit during some of the labor strikes of the early 20th century. While there, he threw himself into those social struggles, which he later chronicled in a book called *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Later, Niebuhr moved to New York City, where he taught social ethics at Union Theological Seminary, shaping the kind of theology that is still practiced in the United Church of Christ broadly, and here at FCCOL in particular. It is a theology that is, broadly speaking, Reformed, growing out of writings produced by Luther and Calvin; it is a theology that is rooted in an understanding of the imperfections of human nature; and it is a theology that is public, unafraid to enter what is regarded as the political sphere. Dietrich Bonhoeffer studied with Niebuhr during his tenure in New York; Martin Luther King based his nonviolent resistance on Niebuhr’s reflections; Jimmy Carter cited Niebuhr as a profound influence; and Barack Obama once called Niebuhr his favorite philosopher. If you wish to understand why a church such as ours advocates for the dismantling of ICE, say, you could do worse than to go back to Niebuhr’s writings.

I recently did just that, rereading the final portion of his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published nearly a hundred years ago, in 1932.<sup>1</sup> There, Niebuhr talks about liberal theologies, the kind of thing that we still practice and preach around here. Based on an enlightened rationality and a belief in the capacity of human beings to learn, change and grow, liberal theologies have done much to curb the excesses of religious fanaticism. Niebuhr himself was located within that intellectual stream, and it’s something I myself value about our tradition. But when confronting great social evils, Niebuhr argues, theologies such as ours tend to fall short. We tend to be calm, deliberative, trusting in the power of education and persuasion. We tend to trust that if we could just sit with someone long enough, if we just had the right words, the right arguments, or just a list of facts, we could shift even the hardest of hearts. And who can dispute that sometimes, persuasion really does work, and people really do become more enlightened. “I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see,” the famous lines of Amazing Grace run.

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010). See the final chapter, “The Conflict Between Individual and Social Morality,” pgs. 257-277.

But Niebuhr warned of situations where cool reflection and rational persuasion were simply not sufficient. He had witnessed the malignancy of white supremacy movements in Detroit, and he had seen the lengths to which factory bosses were willing to go to suppress labor reforms. He had seen the belligerence of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, drawing the world into a cataclysmic war in 1914, and Niebuhr was discerning enough in 1932 to see the storm clouds gathering again in Europe. And so at the conclusion of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he cautions against the cool and detached tendency of liberal theologies. Instead, he suggests that there are times in which a "sublime madness," is necessary, a spiritual and moral vision capable of confronting such malignancies with an imaginative power.<sup>2</sup>

What might such a sublime madness be? What has it looked like down through the ages? What if this was precisely the time for a sublime madness?

After all, when ICE is planning to spend \$38 billion dollars to buy warehouses across the country that will hold up to 1000 human beings, before funneling those same human beings into 8 separate mega-centers that can each hold up to 10,000 people at a time - we might ask if now is the time for a sublime madness of the soul.<sup>3</sup> When people can be disappeared, and held indefinitely in one of those warehouses, only to be sent to some other anonymous prison somewhere across the planet - we might ask if now is the time for a sublime madness. When there are promises to surround voting stations this coming November with the kind of masked gunmen we have seen in the streets of Minneapolis and other places, well, you begin to wonder if now is the time for a sublime madness.<sup>4</sup>

Before proceeding further, it would be wise to put some qualifiers on what Niebuhr meant by that phrase. He knew well that, used injudiciously, a sublime madness could justify any number of violent excesses. After all, the bombing of an abortion clinic might be justified as sublime madness just as readily as the destruction of an oil pipeline. Depending on what sorts of values you hold, both might seem warranted if you're worried enough about this or that possible future. Bonhoeffer's legendary witness - his decision to participate in an assassination plot against Hitler - might be understood as sublime madness, but so too might the decision to assassinate a campus provocateur like Charlie Kirk. Clearly, some guardrails are needed. Niebuhr hoped that rational deliberation could temper the energies unleashed by a sublime madness, but he knew that containing such excesses was difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, pg. 277.

<sup>3</sup> See an article in "The Washington Post," February 13, 2026: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2026/02/13/ice-detention-center-expansion/>

<sup>4</sup> See an article in "The Guardian," February 4, 2026: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/feb/04/steve-bannon-ice-immigration-agents-polling-sites-midterm-elections>

Chris Hedges is a journalist who is also a Presbyterian minister, one I have quoted from time to time from the pulpit. Throughout his career, Hedges has been concerned about the mechanisms used to make violence seem legitimate - state violence, but also the kind that ordinary people sometimes enact. And so instead of trying to classify when this or that decision might be justifiable as sublime madness, he shifts the ground, locating the ultimate power of Niebuhr's concept within the human imagination.<sup>5</sup> A sublime madness is, for Hedges, the power to stand within a situation that has been rendered "normal" and to draw attention to the flagrant abnormality of it. It is the moral clarity to look upon injustices regarded as commonplace, and to say that something is dangerously wrong. Above all, it is the capacity to imagine that another existence is still possible, despite all evidence to the contrary. It is the assurance, as they say in the African-American tradition, that God makes a way where there is no way.

At risk of being simplistic, let me share this story. When I was a high school kid in Ohio, I ran track. The season began in March, and early in the season, there were some outdoor meets that were bitterly cold. On one Saturday, temperatures were in the 30's, and the wind made it seem even colder. It was an all day event, and the only heated spaces within walking distance were the restrooms. And so when we couldn't take the cold any longer, a few friends and I decided we would just sit on the floor of the men's room to stay warm. And my God did it stink. It got worse and worse as the day progressed, but in time, we ceased to notice. The rotten stench seemed entirely normal to us. At one point, our coach entered the bathroom and saw us there. He just stared at us in disbelief. And then he said, "I don't know how you boys can stand this. You need to get out of here." After that, he did just that - he got the hell out, preferring to shiver in the cold than to take one more breath of that awful air.

From a certain vantage, of course, the coach was the sanest of us all. But we regarded him as something of a fool - why shiver out there when you could be in the warmth with us - nevermind the wretched smell.

That is, in essence, the dynamic enacted by those possessed of a divine madness. It is to say that something smells rotten when others can no longer perceive it for themselves. It is to endure discomfort, rather than to stay silent in the company of those who, like me and my friends, grew blissfully unaware of the situation. It is to shiver in the cold - like all those protesters in Minneapolis - where the air is clear, rather than sitting still inside of a hot mess.

On a far more serious note, in Black Elk's memoir of the final days of the Indian wars, after the Lakota people and its culture had been decimated, he remembered Crazy Horse, who was touched with a sublime madness. "[T]he people noticed that Crazy Horse was stranger than ever," Black Elk said. "He hardly ever stayed in the camp. People would find him out alone in the

<sup>5</sup> See Chris Hedges, "A Time for Sublime Madness," published in Truthdig, January 21, 2013: <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/a-time-for-sublime-madness/>

cold, and they would ask him to come home with them. He would not come, but sometimes he would tell the people what to do. People wondered if he ate anything at all. Once my father found him out alone like that, and he said to my father: 'Uncle, you have noticed me, the way I act. But do not worry; there are caves and holes for me to live in, and out here the spirits may help me. I am making plans for the good of my people.'"<sup>6</sup>

I like that last phrase - I am making plans for the good of my people. That is exactly the form of sublime madness that we find in the Hebrew prophets, who, in the words of Abraham Heschel, felt the blast of heaven while the world was asleep.<sup>7</sup> They feel the blast, and then they give it voice, in order to make plans for the good of the people. Isaiah, for example, shouts and cries out, and then tells all of those blissfully going about their business - fasting, praying, much as good church people might do today - to notice the pain of those around them. So too, sublime madness is what fills the prophet Jeremiah, who was said to have a fire in his bones that he could not contain, a fire that caused him to speak words that shocked the society around him. But he delivered that shock in order to preserve the humanity of those around him.

Closer to our own time, it was a sublime madness that animated Frederick Douglass when he criss-crossed the Northern states advocating for abolition. "It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake," Douglass said. So too, it was a kind of sublime madness that the writer Flannery O'Connor advocated. When she was asked why, as a devout Catholic interested in the outpouring of grace, she wrote such shocking stories, she responded, "For the hard of hearing, sometimes it is necessary to shout."

There may be a little shouting later this week, as clergy and laypeople from many faith traditions, gather in front of ICE's headquarters in Hartford on Ash Wednesday. (I actually think it will be a fairly quiet, and somber, affair.) You're all invited. We'll be calling on employees and agents of ICE to repent, to turn back, to walk away from the harm they're inflicting upon our neighbors. We'll be offering prayers, and for the Christians there, we'll be distributing ashes, as a sign of our own repentance, yes, but also as a sign of our commitment to a shared humanity with all of God's children. It is a small, humble enactment of our own form of sublime madness in these indecent, inhumane days. I suspect we shall have to imagine and enact still greater forms of sublime madness if we are to cut through the hardness of both heart and hearing that afflicts far too many people these days.

There is, of course, much more to say, and there will be further Sundays on which to say it. For now, it is enough to say that the interventions we're seeing here and elsewhere are possible because there are caves, of a sort, where the air may be chill, but where it is possible to

<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Hedges, "A Time for Sublime Madness."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

commune with the spirits, and to imagine the good of human beings. That requires standing apart, being willing to withstand discomfort, and sometimes more than that, for the sake of a suffering humanity, and for the sake of a suffering God who long ago showed us this way. Cultivating such an imagination requires spirituality, but it also requires art and poetry. It's only in such recesses of the human soul that a sublime madness is cultivated.

I like to believe that FCCOL is a place such as that - something like the cave in which Crazy Horse resided, where the good of human beings can still be imagined and planned. We shall need the calm, enlightened reflection of our liberal theological heritage. But we shall need more than that too. For now is the time for a sublime madness of the soul.