[1] To say “I’m not political: I will remain neutral” is not neutral. Elie Wiesel said, “Neutrality helps the oppressor never the victim. Silence helps the tormentor, never the tormented.”[i] We live in a time of violent civil unrest. We live in a democracy, but democracy is fragile. We become discouraged and tempted to become cynical. Positive civic engagement is essential. We need educated citizens who are aware of issues, who listen, who learn, and who are ready to work with one another.

[2] The 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution cannot be the predominant “holy” one in the Bill of Rights. The important first two clauses of the 1st Amendment relate to Church and State (or should we say, “Religion and Government”?) In the establishment clause, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,” the nation gives privilege to all religions without discrimination. The free exercise clause, “Or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,”[ii] means that I and my neighbor both have religious freedom. It is not a matter of choosing between the two clauses, or “finding a balance,” but recognizing both are important simultaneously. My exercise of religion cannot hinder another person’s free exercise of their faith. Our government should not become our religion; we are to respect all religions and non-religion.

[3] The “no establishment clause” of the first Amendment required “Disestablishment” which happened gradually, state by state, over a 50-year period in the new United State of America, finally achieved only in 1833. The disestablishment of churches resulted in the organization of national religious bodies independent of state and federal government. The no establishment clause provides neutrality and equality, not the absence of religions. In public and political life, we welcome ideas of many diverse beliefs. This is helpful nationally and certainly in global understanding.

[4] Religious freedom means pluralism, the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. That does not mean I should be less committed to my Lutheran beliefs, but that I should be more rooted in my faith so that I can speak clearly about it and share it wisely. Each religious tradition should be clear about their beliefs. We should not worship the nation.

[5] Our Lutheran theological beliefs are rooted in the Triune God as we study in Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms. Article One of the Apostles Creed: We believe in the God who has created the whole world, including all peoples and nations. We were created for interactive community. Luther wrote that this perverse world has misused these blessings and gifts from God for its own pride and greed, for which we need to repent. God gives life, peace, and security. We cannot control the world, but we are called to preserve and protect the earth.

[6] Article Two: We are entangled in sin. But God has had mercy on our misery and wretchedness. Jesus has swallowed up and devoured death and redeemed us from both personal and communal sin. Repentance is essential. Through Jesus’ birth, death, resurrection, and ascension Christ sets us free to serve one another and to work for justice in the midst of a world still in bondage to racism, classism, sexism and other systemic sins.

[7] Article 3: Some people search for personal spirituality as though it is unrelated to Christian belief and the Church. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ and creates faith. Christianity is an inclusive global church. This is in contrast to Christian Nationalism which believes the United States is God’s only chosen people. The Spirit continues to forgive, gather, include, and empower us for lives of faith.

[8] A clear institutional separation of Religion and Government allows for and indeed encourages functional interaction.[iii] Functional interaction includes one’s civic engagement and engagement among institutional religious bodies and the state. Leaders of faith communities should not tell people how to vote but should encourage them to vote and to be educated citizens. We need to work towards all people having the right and accessibility to vote. Functional interaction will include opposing views; dysfunctional interaction occurs when people want only to see the other side lose.

[9] Because Lutheran beliefs recognize sin and the importance of repentance, we are able to recognize the wrongs in society and our history. Today there are 574 federally recognized Native American tribes living within the United States. Indigenous people should not be reduced to mascots. We need to teach about historic and current systemic racism so that we can understand and grow into being people who respect one another.

American Civil Religion

[10] Although many immigrants/colonizers came to this land in search of religious freedom, they (my ancestors included) systematically and violently denied it to the Indigenous peoples already here through the destruction of tribal identity, culture, religion, language and the destruction of sacred sites.

[11] Robert Bellah in his significant 1967 article “Civil Religion in America” and 1975 book, The Broken Covenant,[iv] wrote that while some have argued that Christianity is the national faith. . . few have realized there actually exists alongside differentiated churches a well-instituted civil religion in America. Many Europeans who came believed God created this chosen people, coming across the Biblical Red Sea (Atlantic Ocean), to conquer the continent. Chosen people with a promised land–American exceptionalism. America’s myth of origin did not include native tribes already here.[v] It did not fit into the story, of “discovery.” Nor did God’s chosen people include the enslaved people brought here against their will from Africa. There were Chinese restrictions, Japanese internment camps, reluctance to receive Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. American Civil Religion (ACR), with its symbols, belief systems, anthems, rituals, creeds and mission, (sin and repentance are missing) is an exclusive ecclesiology and an inadequate/false systematic theology.

[12] Senator Albert Beveridge gave a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate in January of 1900 justifying the war of subjugation the US Army was waging against the Filipino independence movement. “God has made English speaking people to be master organizers of the world, given us the spirit of progress. . . to administer government among savage and senile people. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.”[vi]

[13] I’ve studied ACR since the U.S. bicentennial in 1976. It’s not a dead, but living, religion that changes. I’ve seen this American Civil Religion become entwined with one segment of Christianity, the fundamentalist evangelical right, morphing into a Christian nationalism, distorting both American identity and Christianity. In Christian nationalism one must be a certain kind of Christian and have a certain kind of politics. To be a good, loyal, American, one must be an ultra-right, fundamentalist Christian. Those of other religions don’t “belong” in the United States. This current version of civil religion often overlaps and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. Voter suppression laws are meant to exclude those who are not Christian Nationalists.

[14] Christian Nationalism is idolatrous because it conflates God and country. It has a deep history. The KKK’s goal in 1922 was patriotism and nationalism combined in their focus on white Christianity. The result was lynchings. Today the Proud Boys pray that “God will watch over us as we become proud.” The result is violence.

[15] Even in the mainstream media, most of what is referenced about Christianity in America is the religious/political right. Sometimes there is a word about the Pope. Where is news coverage of the many branches of Christianity? Where is reporting about the ELCA’s bold engagement, messages, and action in regard to systemic racism, care for the climate, and feeding the hungry, here and worldwide? How do we make sure those stories are told and heard in the public world? At the formation of the ELCA in 1987, there was much thought given to the name, and particularly the use of the word “Evangelical.” Today that word is thought to relate only to the Evangelical Christian right, Christian Nationalism. The full meaning of “evangelical” means sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not condemning people of other religions. It means living out the “Good News” of Jesus Christ which includes love of all people, caring for creation, healing, and justice for the needs of the world.

[16 ] The Statement of Purpose of the ELCA’s constitution begins, “The Church is a people created by God in Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.”[vii] This includes: “Study social issues and trends, work to discover the causes of oppression and injustice, and develop programs of ministry and advocacy to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”[viii] As a church body and as individuals, we are called to ministry in the world. In our baptism we are called to ministry in daily life. Not everything we do is automatically ministry, but everything we do carries the potential for ministry. Our ministries need to relate to individual human need in this pluralistic world. Jesus cares about people and also about the political and societal problems related to human need in the world in which we live. We confess our faith within the gathered worshipping community. At the end of the service we hear, “Go in peace, serve the Lord,” When we return to the worshipping community, do we ask each other, “How did you serve in the world this week?”

[17] Public education is essential for an inclusive, educated people. Privatization under the guise of parental choice can divide this nation even further. We need to provide safe, trustworthy places, especially public community schools, that teach about religions, their holy days and place in history. Public schools should not impose or indoctrinate one religion, especially Christian nationalism. Each religious faith community needs to provide children, youth, and adults with religious education so they can learn about their own faith. Then, they can be less fearful and more open to learn about people of other faiths or no faith.

[18] It is helpful to look at the ELCA’s Social Statement, “Our Calling in Education,” (2007) and the book Christian Education as Evangelism written by professors of Christian Education at the then 8 seminaries of the ELCA and the two Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC) seminaries, also published in 2007.[ix] Luther wrote in his appeal to city government to establish schools for the public, that a city’s best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consists in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens. There should be equitable access to high-quality education for all because all are created in God’s image, all have equal worth and dignity and should be treated accordingly. The disturbing reality persists that too many young people do not have access to good public schools. This reality is most pervasive in poor communities, especially where poverty is intertwined with a history of racism and discrimination.

[19] Each person should be able to talk about the faith that informs their values. The question is how we create an environment in this pluralistic nation to be different together. In order to hold different ideas, we need to set and maintain learning environments that are safe, trustworthy, and hospitable. Safe: physically and emotionally. Trustworthy: leaders building trust among the participants. Hospitable: open to all people and their ideas. No need for walls, or exclusion of the other, or for Christianity to be the dominant faith or to believe this nation is God’s chosen nation. We need trustworthy places for us to be different together locally, nationally, and globally. With trust and respect, we can talk about important issues: the climate crisis, immigration policies, gun violence, voting rights, war, and diplomacy. We can as various faith communities work together to preserve the democracy of this republic.

[20] How do we provide trustworthy environments so that we can have healthy functional interaction? In our ministries in daily life, we move about among all kinds of people, making decisions that have political consequences. To listen and learn from each other even while the other’s view may seem strange one could say, “It’s difficult for me to understand how you think.” “Tell me how you came to believe that way?” And then, “I appreciate your saying that. Here is what I think on that subject.” Then, “What other views do those of us present hold?” “We need to avoid letting someone dominate, and make sure each person’s view is heard. I add that not all viewpoints are equal. Some may be full of false facts and this also needs to be said.

[21] ACR is ever changing. It may well change more between the time this is written and when published. Christian Nationalism is not likely to go away all by itself. Commentators say this is the most dangerous time for the United States since the Civil War. Will there be an uncivil war? People long to be “civil” to one another. Civil War and “uncivil war” bring division and death. What is our role as the ELCA, one faith community among many, to preserve the nation for the good of all? How are we truly be able to be different together?

[i] Elie Wiesel in his Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech on 10 December 1986, in the Oslo City Hall, Norway

[ii] Amendments to the U.S. Constitution: Amendment 1

[iii] See John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle, eds., Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

[iv] Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” Daedalus 96 (Winter, 1967) and Bellah, The Broken Covenant (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

[v] There are 574 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States today.

[vi] Bellah, The Broken Covenant, p. p. 38.

[vii] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Constitution, “Statement of Purpose” 4.01.

[viii] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Constitution, “Statement of Purpose 4.03 L

[ix] ELCA Social Statement, “Our Calling in Education” adopted in the 10th churchwide assembly, August 10, 2007, and Norma Cook Everist, ed., Christian Education as Evangelism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).