

My first encounter with Calvin Coolidge came by way of William Allen White's 1938 book "A Puritan in Babylon," the most delightfully titled biography I have ever read and, most probably, will read. White was editor of the *Emporia Gazette* in Emporia, Kansas. Though he ran a local paper in a small community, his political influence was national in scope and was as potent as it was legendary. A son of the heartland, he was a proponent for an internationalist worldview in a Republican Party that was still heavily populated by Midwestern isolationists. But most of all, he was a storyteller, adept at sharing a breaking news item, drawing one into a narrative of a diplomatic imperative, or recounting the life of a New Englander who found himself in the White House. That New Englander, that Puritan, was Coolidge, and the Babylon in which he found himself was the Washington of Warren G. Harding and the Teapot Dome Scandal and the America of the Great Gatsby and the Black Sox.

I enjoyed White's biography twenty years ago. Done with it, I shelved it with my other American history books. I didn't think much about White's book or Mr. Coolidge, to be honest, until earlier this year. That's when I attended a fascinating presentation at the Hanover Inn by Amity Shlaes, the author of a new biography of our 30th president titled with a simplicity and terseness of which the man himself would heartily approve: "Coolidge."

The publication of Professor Shlaes' book was well-timed. For, you see, "Silent Cal" is enjoying something of a boom these days. Long admired within conservative circles – he was among Ronald Reagan's favorite presidents, so much so that his portrait hung in the Cabinet Room – he's been drawing the attention of scholars in recent years. For years seen as a dour figure rooted in the past, Coolidge's successful stewardship of the nation during a time of immense, even dizzying social, political, and technological development, has been drawing renewed interest during our own turbulent era of change.

Now, some of you might be thinking, "This is all very interesting – or, alternatively, as dull as watching paint dry – but I don't come to church to hear history lessons about political figures." And to you I reply, "rightly so." Which is why I ask you to bear with me.

After the lecture, there was a book signing. It was then that I met Professor Shlaes, who asked me what I did. I told her that I was the minister here and her eyes opened wide. "I'm not sure," she said, "but I believe Coolidge's church, First Congregational in Washington, may have been integrated." We spent a few moments talking about the significance of this possibility and I then moved on so someone else would have a chance to speak with her.

I realized that evening that I had never given much consideration to Calvin Coolidge's religious life beyond the most likely apocryphal story about a Sunday on which Mrs. Coolidge had been unable to attend the service with her husband. Supposedly, she asked what the sermon had been about. "Sin," he replied. "Well, what did Dr. Pierce say about it?" she wondered. "He said he was against it,"

Coolidge is said to have explained in his typically terse manner. Once, though, presented with the prospect that he'd belonged to an integrated church in what was still a very Southern, segregated city, I was curious and I was intrigued. What I soon learned was impressive and inspiring.

Calvin Coolidge took his faith seriously, not as a politician seeking to sway demographic groups, not as a national figure wishing to shape his public persona, but as a Christian who tried as best he could to live what he confessed. He didn't attend prayer breakfasts, nor did he cultivate relationships with the nation's most prominent Protestant clergy. He most certainly did not bang on publicly about what Jesus would have him do. But he executed the duties of his office as a man who took seriously the Gospel.

Calvin Coolidge was one of four presidents whose professed religious faith can be associated with our denomination, the United Church of Christ, or its forebear the Congregational Church. The first was John Adams; the second, his son, John Quincy Adams, whose post-presidential career with its heroic and inspiring battle against slavery is deserving of a sermon of its own. However, to be fair, it should be noted that though both began life as Trinitarians, they harbored Unitarian sympathies in their later years. The third president on the list is the present incumbent, Barack Obama, who for many years was a member of Trinity United Christ of Church in Chicago. However, as a candidate, Obama resigned his membership in Trinity in the wake of the controversy stemming from his pastor's teaching and preaching and has yet to formally join a new congregation. Caveats aside, however, we'll claim all three of them in addition to Coolidge. After all, we have a bit of work to do if we're to ever catch up with the Presbyterians (eight), let alone the Episcopalians (eleven) on the presidential denominational tally. However, if we are to be scrupulous, it is Calvin Coolidge, and only Calvin Coolidge, who among our nation's chief executives can be fairly described as having been a traditional, Trinitarian Congregationalist his entire adult life.

Religion was a part of Coolidge's life from the beginning, as he grew up among Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists. His Coolidge forebears built the church in his hometown of Plymouth Notch, Vermont, his grandfather used the Gospel of John to help teach young Calvin to read, his grandmother taught Sunday school, and before and perhaps after his mother's death prayer sessions were held in the Coolidge home.

Calvin began his education at a Baptist boarding school, then spent some time at St. Johnsbury Academy. There he attended a service with the local "Congos." Yes, it seems, he knew the in-house lingo.

When it came time to attend college, he chose Amherst. And while the rationale for Amherst's founding no longer guided the school's academic mission, it is worth noting that the college got its start as a theologically conservative, Trinitarian

riposte to what were perceived as the dangerously liberal, i.e., Unitarian, attitudes holding sway at Harvard.

Western Massachusetts would prove to be formative in many parts of Coolidge's life. It was there he went to college, there he began the practice of law, there he embarked on a political career. And it was there he met his future wife Grace, a member of the Edwards Church in Northampton.

Now, it should be noted that it would be difficult to find a church that was more Congregationalist than Edwards, which was named after the seminal Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards, who ministered to the people of Northampton while profoundly shaping the Protestant religion in America. Coolidge did not join the church. Indeed, he did not join any church until he was president. But his reasons for not establishing a formal affiliation with a congregation are not what one might guess: there were no reservations about the tenets of the faith, no lingering questions about theology, no nagging doubts about belief.

Instead, Coolidge refrained from joining a church because he wasn't sure he was worthy. He didn't want to make a pledge to be part of a congregation, assuming what he believed were the responsibilities of living in a covenantal community, only to fall short of the mark. In short, he didn't want to be a hypocrite. So he went to church regularly but didn't join.

Then an interesting thing happened one Sunday in the nation's capital.

The Coolidges began attending First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C., shortly after Calvin was sworn in as Vice President. A little more than two years later, Warren Harding died and Calvin Coolidge found himself in the White House. On August 5th, 1923, Jason Noble Pierce, the minister, invited members and visitors who wished to do so to come forward to take communion. The President and his wife presented themselves. Afterwards, Rev. Pierce asked the church to enroll the Coolidges as members retroactive to the date they first took communion; this request was unanimously accepted. In his autobiography Coolidge noted his deep gratitude to the way he was brought into membership of the church. Being a part of First Congregational Church meant enough to the president that when his pastor Dr. Pierce was chairing the local arrangements committee of the meeting of the National Council of Congregational Churches that was being held in Washington, he agreed to serve as honorary moderator of the gathering. And, each Christmas Eve, the Coolidges hosted the church choir for a carol sing and concert at the White House after the lighting of the National Christmas Tree (a tradition begun during Calvin's presidency).

Prior to the Civil War, Congregationalists, who were often associated with Abolition, were a rarity in the capital. During the war, though, things changed as the city's population exploded. Among those who came to work in government and support the Union effort were many Congregationalists and they needed a place to worship.

That need was met in 1865 with the founding of the First Congregational Church. From its very beginning the church was committed to welcoming all people, white or black, into membership. When questions arose over the founding pastor's commitment to full integration of the congregation, he left. In the years to come the church would take the lead in founding Howard University. This commitment to racial equality continued down through the years and in 1925, in the midst of the Coolidge Presidency, Marian Anderson was invited to give a concert.

From today's vantage, none of this may seem significant. But consider the nature of Washington, indeed the nation, in the 1920s. Racism was omnipresent. Blacks were being lynched regularly. Overt segregation was the norm. And in the midst of all this, President Calvin Coolidge chose to worship at a church that had since its founding been associated with full equality between the races. Perhaps this choice of faith community was driven solely by his desire to participate in a familiar form of worship. But if that was the case, there were other liturgically congenial and politically convenient options available. Yet Coolidge did not choose those options. Instead, though seeking no fanfare, he was making a statement, not through words, but through action. If what Paul taught – that in Jesus Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, free nor slave – was true, there was no reason the president of the United States should have any qualms about worshipping with, and formally affiliating with, a congregation that welcomed the descendant of slaves to become members.

Coolidge wasn't one to speak the needs of interest groups; he was concerned with the individual. This approach can be problematic when one is part of a minority seeking redress. However, a letter of complaint afforded him the opportunity to make clear his attitude about racial issues during the 1924 campaign. A disgruntled voter was displeased that an African-American was seeking a Republican nomination for a congressional race. Coolidge replied, "I was amazed to receive such a letter. During the war 500,000 colored men and boys were called up under the draft not one of whom sought to evade it. A colored man is precisely as much entitled to submit his candidacy" as anyone else. Coolidge made sure his response was publicized and he included it prominently in a later collection of his works. In a day when discrimination was rampant, Coolidge spoke out, perhaps not as we in the 21st century would have liked, but in a way that was striking for someone in his position at that time. It is hard, given where he chose to worship, to think that this action didn't stem from a worldview shaped by his faith.

We know that faith sustained Coolidge after the death of his son Cal, Jr. in 1924. And his faith may well have given Coolidge the humility to walk away from the presidency in 1928 rather than seek a second full term.

Calvin Coolidge wasn't an ostentatiously religious man. He didn't give interviews promoting his faith. He didn't profess Christianity to earn votes. Instead, he lived a life of quiet, genuine faithfulness. And so, on this Independence Day Weekend, as we

salute our nation's founding, and honor our American story, let's also take a moment to appreciate Calvin Coolidge, Congregationalist.