

May 20, 2007
John 17:20-26

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Rev. Robin Long

And I quote . . .

“I know this is painful for the ladies to hear, but if you get married, you have accepted the headship of a man, your husband. Christ is the head of the household and the husband is the head of the wife, and that’s the way it is, period.”
Pat Robertson

“Rail as they will about ‘discrimination,’ women are simply not endowed by nature with the same measures of single-minded ambition and the will to succeed in the fiercely competitive world of Western capitalism.”
Pat Buchanan

“We don’t necessarily discriminate. We simply exclude certain types of people.”
Colonel Gerald Wellman, ROTC instructor

“You say you’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist.”
Pat Robertson

“I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good . . . Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don’t want equal time. We don’t want pluralism.”
Randall Terry, Founder of Operation Rescue

And a final word from Mr. Robertson . . .

“The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”

Now I’m guessing that some of you are out there this morning thinking, “Well yes Robin, those people said those things but they’re extremists. They’re looking to draw attention to themselves. Nobody around here is like that.” And if this is indeed what you are thinking then I say to you, “O, *contraire mon ami*”—for I have witnessed first hand this kind of judgmental and exclusionary—not to mention mean—behavior right here in our own backyard.

Last year, around this time, I was working out at the *Curves* here in Suttons Bay. The ladies around me began talking about Suttons Bay Ecumenical Vacation Bible School. One of them said, “Well, did you know that Rev. So and So refuses to participate in Bible School because of the Congregational Minister?” The lady obviously had no idea that I was said Congregational Minister. With my interest peaked to a fevered pitch I nonchalantly asked, without missing a shoulder shrug, “Really. What about the Congregational Minister?” I was just dying to hear the response. I couldn’t wait to hear the dirt that was going around town about me. As I replayed the tapes of recent conversations I had had and actions I had taken in my mind, I couldn’t imagine what I could have said or done to Rev. So and So. Truth be told, I had never even met the guy and so I couldn’t figure out why he would have such an aversion to

me—an aversion so strong that he would keep the children of his church from participating in the fun and learning of Vacation Bible School.

The gossip in question responded, “He won’t participate in VBS because the Congregational Minister is a woman.” Uh, I was so disappointed. There are SO many better reasons for a fundamentalist who takes the Scriptures as the literal word of God to not want to be around me—reasons that I’ve spent a good deal of time, energy, and money learning to articulate. And this guy doesn’t approve of me simply because I don’t have a “Y” chromosome. What a bore! If you’re going to insult me, please at least take the time to get to know me first so that your insult can be personal and reveal that you have some knowledge of who I am, not just what I am. I tell you, Rev. So and So from Suttons Bay could surely take a lesson about making judgmental and insulting comments from Rev. What’s His Name of Traverse City. Soon after Corey and I moved here to start The Potter’s House, the church we planted for the United Church of Christ, a local minister in Traverse City referred to The Potter’s House as “the church for queers and commies.” Now at least he took the time to learn a little bit about us—at least he checked out the website and read our mission statement and knew that we don’t discriminate against any person regardless of gender, race, creed, or sexual orientation. At least he knew that it was our vision and passion to create a congregation in which all of God’s children felt loved, accepted, and celebrated. Rev. What’s His Name did his homework. Rev. So and So didn’t even bother.

And so you see, extreme, judgmental, and in the end, hurtful words and behaviors are not limited to Christian leaders on the national scene—they are also the arena of our neighbors and would be friends. And this painful reality makes it very hard for me to get my head wrapped around Jesus’ words in John’s gospel. He speaks these words to the disciples at the Last Supper. These are his last statements to his friends—his last opportunity to give them direction and advice. And this is what he chooses to say as he prays with and for them.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

No less than three times does Jesus talk about the unity of his followers—no less than three times does he pray that we may all be one. And my response to Jesus is, “But I don’t wanna be one. I don’t wanna be like them.” They say things that hurt people I love, they insult me and the things I believe, they are, in my mind, their lives—are to me—antithetical to the life of Christ who welcomed all, loved all, and included all. And the fundamentalists response to Jesus about folks like me would likely be similar to my response about them—“What—one with her?” They would ask? And then they would go on to explain, “but the Apostle Paul made it clear that women are supposed to keep their mouths shut in church. And the scriptures make it clear that homosexuality is an abomination while she preaches inclusivity and acceptance. She and those like her wouldn’t know the Word of God if it slapped them in the face. We refuse to be one with—and here I’ll take the liberty of apply Pat Robertson’s words—the Spirit of the Antichrist.”

And so our question for this morning is, where does this leave us? We’re a church who—according to our mission and vision we, and I quote our website, “remain a church uniquely committed to accepting

people from any different experiences and faith backgrounds. We have no creed; we celebrate our diversity. 'Everyone welcome' is not just a phrase, it is our approach to worship and life." And yet, how do we love, accept, and be in community with people who make our skin crawl, people who have made it their life's mission to undo all of the progress the church has made towards inclusivity, compassion, and unity?

The death of Jerry Falwell this week has brought this all to a head for me. My initial response to the news was, "Oh, that's too bad" which is my initial response to the news that anyone has died—for surely he leaves behind friends and family who loved him very much and who are very sad that he is gone. But that response was soon replaced by another feeling—the feeling of relief. I admit that I am relieved that a man who has caused so much division in the Body of Christ, so much pain for members of the church, a man who—through his words and acts of intolerance—has worked hard to make the Church of Jesus Christ intolerant is now ensconced in God's heavenly embrace. I'm glad that he is now unavailable for the Sunday morning news program roundups. I'm glad that he's no longer making intolerant and judgmental remarks that make folks who stayed home from church that morning glad they did just that. Back in the 80s there was a popular Bon Jovi song with the lyric, "You give love a bad name." And that's exactly the way I feel about Mr. Falwell, that he gave love a bad name.

Now I don't have an explanation of how we are to overcome these vast divides in the Body of Christ. But I do have an example of when I've seen it done and how I envision that it could be done. The example comes right from within the walls of our church. A few months ago a group of folks gathered to watch the movie Jesus Camp. The movie presents two extreme views of religion. Some of the folks in the room sighed every time the liberal commentator came on—they found him to be obnoxious and off base. Other folks in the room sighed every time the fundamentalist leader of a Christian camp for kids opened her mouth. They found her obnoxious and narrow minded. There were surely two extremes represented in the room that evening. When the film was over Michael Smith summed up what I think both "sides" would have determined was wrong with the other side, he just said, "Where's the love. Jesus was about love." And never were more true words spoken. The movie was full of antagonism and an us/them mentality. And into the division and defensiveness of that movie that was then reflected in those who had watched it—into that animosity Michael spoke the truth of the Gospel—the truth of love. And with his reminder, I think all of us present were able to reframe our thinking and approach to those who are different than we are.

Another example of what can be done when there is such disagreement present among the children of God is to look for the points of agreement. I know this sounds simple, and yet we rarely do it. Again, an example from the group who watched Jesus Camp. After the movie, someone in our group asked, "Do you think there's anyone in our congregation who really believes that the world was created 6000 years ago when science and reason present so many arguments against such a belief." I responded that I think that yes, there probably are people in our congregation who believe the world was created in 6000 years. And then, and I swear it was a moment that the Holy Spirit was upon me because I don't—of my own accord—come up with thoughts like this—then I felt moved to ask—"But why does that matter?" And why does it? Who cares if you think the world was created 6000 years ago while the guy beside you in the pew thinks it was created 6 billion years ago. What difference does it make? What does make a difference is how you treat the world now—how you care for God's creation. It doesn't matter if you think the elements in this glass of water are 6000 or 6 billion years old, what matters is that you take care of the Bay, avoid using harmful chemicals to clean your house and fertilize your lawn, and

recognize that the earth is God's and you are the steward of it. Where we're going—not where we've been is what is of greatest importance.

No, I don't know how to heal the divisions among the people of God, all I do know is that we are not exempt from trying. It is not an option for us to take our ball and go home and never play with those mean kids again. It is Jesus' prayer that we would all be one and if the only way we can do that is to search for that one commonality we have with the other—well then that's where we have to start. I admit that when I was working on a Habitat for Humanity house with Rev. What's His Name from Traverse City, the guy who thinks The Potter's House is a church for queers and commies, I admit that when we were out sweating in the sun together on that house—our differences were not nearly as important as our shared vision of a family having a home to call their own. And I imagine that it wouldn't bother me so much that Rev. So and So thinks it's a sin for me to be standing here in the pulpit because I'm a woman if I were to find myself in a situation in which I was standing next to him at a benefit for the Women's Resource Center because we share the common belief that women should be safe and secure and respected in their own homes. These small commonalities are the place to start.

And to remind ourselves of that common starting place, I encourage us to ask ourselves Mike's question—"Where's the love?" Because when we find the love—a shared love for nature, a shared love for children, a shared love for those who are abused and neglected, a shared love for those who are in prison—when we find the love we will find the person, not the labels and the rhetoric, and getting past the labels and rhetoric and learning to love one another—well—when we find that love, then we will find the unity, then we will be the fulfillment of Christ's prayer "that they may all be one." And in the end, that will be the only thing that really matters.