

Love, Not Fear

Text: 1 John 4:18; Luke 7:47

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I caught an article in *The New York Times* about six weeks ago which said that The Rev. Dr. Mel White was going to be invited to dinner by Jerry Falwell of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in that marvelously named city, Lynchburg. I had more or less forgotten about it, and then last night I caught just a little glimpse of a newscast and there was Jerry Falwell and Mel White on the television screen together. Yesterday was the day of the dinner. I didn't get enough of the newscast to give you accurate details; I know that what was proposed was that Mel White was to bring about 200 gay-lesbian people to Lynchburg to have dinner with 200 of Jerry Falwell's people. The reason this came about was that Mel White had been sending open letters to Jerry Falwell on the Internet, I understand. Mel heads up an organization called Soulforce. In fact, when he was here a couple of years ago, he led a seminar on Saturday morning in which some of you participated. It is a seminar on non-violence and he borrows from Gandhi and from Martin Luther King, who borrowed from Gandhi, in the use of non-violent protest in order to gain civil rights, human dignity, to change government structures, and so forth.

You may remember that Mel White was a part of the inner core of what has come to be known as the Religious Right in this country. He was a ghostwriter for the biographies of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, and others, and he was very intimately connected with the leaders of that whole movement. Then he declared himself to be gay after years of anguish and struggle. He had been married, had children, had gone through therapy, including all kinds of torturous attempts to prove to himself that he was not a gay person, and finally declared himself and lives openly now and is an advocate for gay rights, and particularly for his conviction that God loves all people, gay and straight and all the rest.

So, the dinner apparently took place. I did hear Jerry Falwell say, "I stand where I have always stood, the biblical position on the practice of any homosexual engagement is it's wrong, contrary to scripture." Mel White simply, on the other side of that issue, said, "I sit here with my brother in Christ and the reason for the coming together is Mel White's attempt to get leaders of the very conservative, evangelical movement to lower the decibels of their rhetoric, the kind of rhetoric

against the homosexual community which certainly has to be an element in the gay-bashing and the violence that has so tragically been experienced in the last months and years.”

At the end of the first service, someone came running up to me who had already seen the morning paper and said that Jerry Falwell is in trouble and is now the victim himself of protest, being called a hypocrite by some of his religious colleagues for what they call a compromise of sitting down with Mel White, and so the story goes on.

I thought of that in the context of the dinner at Simon's house. There are not a lot of parallels with that account in Luke's Gospel, but there is a sense in which what happened between Jerry Falwell and Mel White was something like what was happening between Jesus and Simon. Now, it has nothing to do with being a Jew. It really has nothing to do with him being a Pharisee. It has everything to do with Simon being a serious, responsible religious person who was very much committed to a tradition, a tradition that is very control-oriented in terms of being well structured, with all the rules in place, everyone knowing what one is to do and what one is not to do. Simon simply is a representative of the guardians of the moral, theological, the biblical tradition. A good person. I think he invited Jesus, according to Luke, because he was interested. Who is this man?

And he also was not only interested, he was somewhat threatened by Jesus because it was Jesus' manner of life and ministry that was very threatening to a person like Simon. Jesus suggested that the marginalized were loved by God and had access to God. Jesus had table fellowship with all sorts and conditions of humankind. Jesus didn't play by conventional wisdom. All of this is old hat for us, I know, but nonetheless, this is what was going on. Jesus was a threat to a very traditional and tight religious system that knew who was in and who was out, that knew who was right and what was wrong.

I couldn't help thinking about that story, being reminded about this encounter between Jerry Falwell and Mel White, if there were, indeed, 200 on either side of the table from each contingent, I'd like to imagine Jesus there. What if Jesus would come into the room? What do you think? What if seeing Jesus there, after all he's been through, Mel White just got overwhelmed. I've seen him cry. I can imagine him throwing himself at Jesus' feet, weeping. I think Jesus would have been very comfortable with it. I suspect that Jerry Falwell may have squirmed a little, because when you think that concretely, where would Jesus' sympathies lie? Can there be any question about that, in light of the nature of Jesus' ministry, his posture, his attitude, his spirit? I hope some good comes out of it, and I respect Jerry Falwell, no matter how much pressure was put on him, he apparently sat down with the enemy, and there's conversation, and good can come of that, and he'll probably suffer for doing it. But, I see it as a positive sign.

Some of you read the newspaper with me in mind. Someone sent me an editorial, another person called me about it. It appeared in *The Grand Rapids Press*,

written by Richard Cohen, and it referred to that leading statesman of our day, Jesse Ventura. Jesse Ventura did a body slam on religion, and a colleague of Richard Cohen wrote an article chastising Jesse Ventura for doing that, saying, "Jesse Ventura, you forgot all the sterling names of Christian leaders who have made a difference," and he named Mother Teresa and Reinhold Neibuhr, Martin Luther King, and so forth. Richard Cohen says, "Ah, but I have to say to my colleague -they're all dead. All the heroes are dead, and the celebrities today have taken quite a different tack. There was a time when the Reinhold Neibuhrs had the ear of power and could speak a word for grace and for inclusion and for integrity, but today the names that are bandied about and making news are names that are on the other side of the issue, time and again."

Mr. Cohen refers to Eugene Carson Blake, a fine Presbyterian leader of the World Council of Churches back in the 60s, a time when some of you can remember the mainline church had to decide what it would do on the race question and finally, belatedly, stood up, took a stand and moved, and the nation moved, as well, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a consequence, not a little consequence of the fact that the mainline church finally said, "This is right." Cohen points out the fact that those heroes that his colleague mentioned in the column were the people who called us to be better than we are, to be done with prejudice and bigotry, to inclusion and embrace, and he contrasts that with what is going on in our own day. So, he says, maybe Jesse Ventura wasn't altogether out of line, but he points out the fact that the current crop of religious leaders don't ask us to accept homosexuality and they refuse to deal with the consequences of their rhetoric which leads to the gay-bashing, and he says what is necessary is to do what was done, for example, in the church at large recognizing that its traditional anti-Semitism fed into the Holocaust. He says they also do not ask us to accept and understand modernity. They reject it almost in its entirety. For instance, in the matter of science and religion. They simply reject science and believe religion which is currently the case in Kansas, to which he points.

There was a piece within the last two or three weeks about a couple in Kansas, again, very good and sincere people, who with their pastor are quoted saying if we lose Creation, we lose everything. The woman was a public school teacher who couldn't teach in good conscience anymore in the public school and so now she's in the Christian school whose library has a book with an orange sticker saying, "Warning: This book contains statements about evolution," and a book on great scientists that has the chapter on Darwin ripped out!

Well, what's going on, friends? What's going on? Let me suggest that fear is going on, that all of this raucousness is consciously or unconsciously rooted in fear. If I were to read another lesson this morning, I would have read the lesson from Genesis, the third chapter, about our forbears, Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve, who bit the apple, felt their guilt, hid in the bushes because they were afraid. And that profound myth recognizes fear as something endemic in the human person. Maybe the fear even precedes the breaking of the commandment. Maybe the fear

comes from that anxiety of splashing down the birth canal into a cold, wide-open world, bright and cold. Whatever it is, there's fear in the human heart. And if I were to rewrite the Genesis myth (now, there's presumption for you), that profound story, if it were to be written today, we wouldn't have Mr. Adam and Mrs. Eve in their blissful perfection and innocence, frolicking in the garden. We would have an animal with a dawning conscience, and then a consciousness of another. We would have a story of two animals becoming human, and in that becoming human, in consciousness, self-consciousness, and consciousness of the other, we would have the first glimmerings of the possibility of relationship and community and, in the further development, we would have the first glimmerings of the possibility of love, of love in relationship, and we would understand even as far down the line as we are at this point in that evolutionary process of which we are a part, that there is a fear in the core of our being because we carry with us that whole genetic code, we carry with us that whole collective unconscious of the animal that survived because there was fear as a defense mechanism and alertness to every threat, a suspicion of every movement. Who survived? Those who had the savvy to fear and that fear, that threat to my person had to be dealt with, and consequently, in spite of the fact that we have come to the point where we have learned to love and understand Spirit and have left that primitive stage far behind, we are still people who very quickly become afraid, and what happens to an animal that gets cornered? And what happens to us when we come under threat?

I do believe that we are seeing it all over the map in our time, so much threat, consequently so much fear, consequently so much violence, because, you see, what we tend to do as religious people, and religion really is a defense mechanism against the insecurities of the abyss of life, what we tend to do is structure something that is very clear, very solid, and very sure. We want it secure; we want a place to stand. We want to know who we are, why we are, whence we've come, whither we're going. We want answers.

Life is full of mystery. Life is marked by tragedy. Life participates in awful suffering. How do you figure it out? How do you exist? It's scary business, and so, one of the places we go for security, for certainty, for shelter and refuge is religion, and the more certain, the better. Give me a divine revelation, give me an inerrant Bible, give me an infallible Pope so that in the midst of this stream of history that is ever moving, ever opening up into broader vistas, I have a rock upon which to stand. When that rock moves, I become afraid, and when I become afraid, I can't love because love and fear do not dwell together.

This is what John was saying in the fourth chapter of his first letter, perhaps the most profound statement of the scriptures, perhaps the one we would take if we could have only one - *God is love*. Think of the implications of that statement. God is love. Think of the light that that casts on the whole human story and the whole of reality - God is love. But, you see, if John simply said that and stopped, it would be one more propositional statement; it would be one more creedal

affirmation, and it would be part of that belief system that we might cling to for security, and oh, how we want that belief system to be true and how we want that belief system to be believed by everyone else, and how we want every other belief system not to be true. Isn't that true?

There was an article yesterday in the religious section of *The Press* that said that just down here south of us in some meeting of Deacons came the idea for a Millennial Campaign, entitled, "What If It's True?" The first proposition is, "What if it's true that Jesus is the only way to God?" Gosh, we want that to be true. Why do we want that to be true? We want to be true; we want to be *right*: we want to be right *alone*. The article said that we, Christ Community, could join in. They're gathering congregations now. Do you want to be a part of it? Buttons, flyers, posters, billboards. They're going to spend \$243,000 at the turn of the millennium to suggest to under-churched and religiously deprived Western Michigan that it might be true, and I asked myself couldn't we better take that effort and live out something concretely with our neighbors? Because that's what John says. He doesn't leave it with, "God is love." That is a creedal affirmation. Creedal affirmations aren't true because we believe them. You can't believe them into truth. You can't find security and certainty and peace in any intellectual formulation.

It's in the experience of love, dear friends. That's what John was saying. God is love, and the one who loves dwells in God and God dwells in that one. God is love, and the one who dwells in love abides in God and God abides in that one. God is love and when that is experienced, that becomes an existential, experiential reality that puts my heart at rest when I experience concretely love.

John says, don't sit in splendid isolation contemplating God and fall in love with God. Well, there have been a few mystics throughout the centuries who were able to do that, but not according to John. John says no one has seen God, but you can see one another, and when you love one another, you are experiencing the love of God and the reality of God.

He goes on, then, to say there's no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear. It seems really simple to me and I don't know what I'm missing. Honestly, I don't know what I'm missing. I want to keep saying, "What are we afraid of? Why do we fear?" Because it is true - fear and love don't co-exist. There is hostility bristling across the table; there is tension in the room; there is over-againstness, adversarial spirit, mutual condemnation, threat, and down deep we're scared to death of each other.

Then somebody moves in and loves, becomes the concretization of love, the embodiment of love, the word made flesh dwelling among us. In this we know the love of God, that God sent the Son, this concrete experience of incarnation, the embodiment of God in Jesus. That's where it started. It was in that person-to-person encounter. That's where love was experienced, and where love is experienced, somehow or other the questions dissolve and the fear is scattered.

Where love prevails, there God is. John is so blunt. He says, "Don't tell me you love God when you hate your brother. If you can't love your brother whom you can see, who is flesh and blood, don't talk to me about loving God."

So, this is my word this morning - Let us love one another and be agents of love out there, in every situation, every conflict situation, and every place where someone is being put down or marginalized or oppressed or taken advantage of or abused, because we have seen what love is, we have seen what God is because we have seen what love is, because we have seen love embodied and we have experienced it, haven't we? Isn't love that alone which transforms?

It certainly is my story. The experience of unconditional grace, the experience of being embraced rather than shunned, the experience of being healed and helped and lifted, rather than left and discarded - that is transforming. All of the rigidity and all of the sincerity and all of the responsible religious structure cannot change one human heart. It can give guidance, it can coerce, it can control, but only love can transform, and where love is, fear will not be. And where there is not fear, there will not be violence and the destruction of one another.

God is love. Those who abide in love, abide in God. There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear. Jesus said to the woman, "Go in peace. You have a lot of love."