

This is the Time and This is the Place

Pentecost XIX

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16; 43-48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

From a textbook that we are using on Wednesday evenings in our class, Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of the World Order*, I read this paragraph,

Every civilization sees itself as the center of the world and writes its history as the central drama of human history. This has been perhaps even more true of the West than of other cultures. Such mono-civilizational viewpoints, however, have decreasing relevance and usefulness in a multi-civilizational world. Scholars of civilizations have long recognized this truism. In 1918, Spangler denounced the myopic view of history prevailing in the West with its neat division into ancient, medieval and modern phases relevant only to the West. It is necessary, he said, to replace this Ptolemaic approach to history with a Copernican one, and to substitute for the empty figment of one linear history the drama of a number of mighty cultures.

A few decades later, Toynbee castigated the parochialism and impertinence of the West manifested in the egocentric illusions that the world revolved around it, that there was an unchanging East and that progress was inevitable. The illusions and prejudices of which these scholars warn, however, live on, and in the late twentieth century have blossomed forth into the widespread and parochial conceit that the European civilization of the West is now the universal civilization of the world.

And, at the bottom of that page which concludes chapter two, I penned, "And then September 11, 2001."

I wonder, as I am sure you do as well, whether or not the tragedy of September 11 will significantly alter our human consciousness, whether the revelation of our vulnerability will affect the way we live, think, worship, believe. I wonder if there is a dawning consciousness that will enable us to recognize the illusions, the

myths with which we live, about the centrality of our own perspective and point of view, whether or not some progress in the human story may be possible because finally the dullness of our spirits has been penetrated.

When I read the paragraph from Samuel P. Huntington that I cited just a moment ago, what leapt off the page at me was his suggestion that the historians need to experience a Copernican revolution, shorthand for a total restructuring of thought and understanding. Copernicus, you will remember, was a bishop of the Church who, in the 16th, maybe 15^{* century}, through some primitive calculations determined that the earth was not the center of the universe, but rather circled around the sun. That was revolutionary thinking, and somehow or other Copernicus kept it under cover. But his disciple, Galileo, did further calculations and with a primitive instrument established beyond a shadow of a doubt that, indeed, Copernicus was right, the earth was not the center of the universe. The earth orbited the sun, as did several other planets, and we were a middlin' star in this universe that was visible, accessible at that time. Well, of course, the moment that was proclaimed, it not only demoted the earth from its central place and humanity from its center place before the face of God, but it also was contrary to the scriptures that spoke in poetic fashion, to be sure, but of the earth as the center.

And so, you know the story. Galileo was put on trial, his life was threatened, except if he recant, which he did mumbling, we're told, under his breath, "but it's still true," put under house arrest. But, in the good time and the good grace of the Church, of course, as is always true of the Church, the Church comes around. It took only from the 16th century until 1991, December 28, when the Vatican said Galileo was right. But, what struck me was Huntington's use of that Copernican revolution as an analogy for what has to happen in our understanding of history, and he quotes Spangler in his great work, *The Decline of the West* (1918), Spangler saying that is what we need in our thinking about history. We need a Copernican revolution. He cites Toynbee, the great scholar of civilization, talking about our parochialism. And then Samuel Huntington concludes the chapter by saying, "These scholars have been talking this way for a long time, but still our illusions and our myths live on."

Well, Huntington published in 1996, and I read the book at the end of 1999. I even preached on *The Clash of Civilizations* and the healing of the nations under the theme, "A Millennial Vision," January 23, 2000. I thought it was important, and I thought it was important enough to bring to your attention. But I have to admit, after September 11, it's like the whole thing comes alive in a new dimension, and suddenly I read Spangler's statement about the need of a Copernican revolution and I read Huntington's saying the illusions and the myths just seem to go on in spite of the fact that there are intelligent voices saying otherwise, and then I switch from the dullness of the historian to the even greater dullness of the religionist.

This morning I am not interested in dealing with that with which Huntington deals, that is, the new historical perspective after the Cold War of the civilizational groupings that make up our reality. I simply begin there to see how interesting it is to take an analogy from the fields of the sciences and apply it to history, and I want to apply it to religion, because I want to say to you this morning that, in the light of September 11, it is absolutely imperative that those who are observant religious people around the world come to a deeper and new appreciation of the nature of religion, and the fact that, just as we write history from our own point of view, so we write our religion from our own point of view, as do the respective religions of the world, all seeing *themselves* in the center as the holder of the truth.

Within the Eastern faiths it is not so serious, because they're happy to invite another point of view because they are not exclusive. But, particularly within Christianity and to a certain extent Islam, it is written into the very charter of what our story tells us, that our Christian faith, for example, is true, absolutely true, exclusively true, and the missionary mandate of the Christian Church is to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, and the whole structure and biblical scheme is that, when Christ has been brought to the whole world, the end will come. That is part and parcel of the very heart of our understanding as Christian people.

Now in this congregation we have moved off from that exclusivism. We have moved from exclusivism to a posture of pluralism. We have come to recognize that the great religious traditions are traditions that, along with our tradition, are recipients of the truth of God, the revelation of God, and the experiences of the grace of God. We have made that move, which is no small move, and which came with no little wrenching and at considerable cost. But we at Christ Community Church affirm that, while Jesus is our window to God, others have other windows which are also valid for the experience of communion with God and the experience of the grace of God.

I find that it is rather easy to sit back and relax and pat ourselves on the back and say, "You know, what a sophisticated and enlightened people we are. Now we can just get on with our lives." I want to say after September 11, we have to recognize how imperative it is that that posture that we have been invited into be witnessed to and offered and, if need be, defended. I want us to realize this morning, in the light of September 11, that, if it was necessary at one point for those who studied astronomy to go through a mind-wrenching revolution, if it is necessary for those who study history to get released from their parochialism and their myopic vision, then, dear friends, how much more it is for the religious people of the world to open their minds to the threat and the danger of exclusivism and absolutism, and to recognize that our religious experience is the source of that spiritual insight and comfort for *us*, but it is *our* story, a valid story, but not the *only* story.

You might think that September 11 would change the picture, but I have a letter here from Pat Robertson. "Dear Richard Rhem." (They're good. If I get on his list, everybody's on his list. The only mistake he made is Christ Community *Reformed* Church. That figures.) But, it's a letter that talks about the crisis at present and you know how Falwell and Robertson backed off from their insensitive remarks immediately after the crisis. But I'll tell you what - they've not changed their mind one whit. "Throughout our history our true protection has not come from armed forces, our police, our intelligence. Our protection has been the covering hand of a gracious God. Modern day America has repudiated that," and so on and so forth. "Has our conduct caused a loving God to lift his hand of protection from us, and if it has, what can His people do?" Well, of course, there are kits and books and all kinds of things, and a contribution request.

Yesterday's *Grand Rapids Press*, on the same page in which there was a little story about Bishop Spong's visit here, and a little synopsis of his calling us to maturity and to grow up and to recognize that that cozy, parental God does not exist, there is an advertisement for the fall conference of the Seventh Reformed Church, and it is entitled, "The Other Side of the Good News: The Challenge of Universalism," and Friday night you could hear a survey of contemporary universalisms. We might come in for mention. Saturday morning early, a defense of the doctrine of everlasting punishment. Now, how would you like to be in the position of creating the defense for the doctrine of eternal damnation? I mention that only because I want you to know that September 11, in many cases, hasn't changed anything. There is still that very conservative and orthodox and fundamentalist element within the Christian Church that is pushing exclusivism, Jesus Christ alone for salvation, and the condemnation of all those who share another point of view.

The Seventh Reformed Church, you may remember, was pastored by my dear friend, John Richard deWitt, whose recent letter to me closed by saying, "I love you very much." Now, that, too, is a mystery. But here we are at opposite ends, opposite poles, and yet at Duba's table we were able, Tuesday after Tuesday, to carry on wonderful civil dialogue, and if you think it was good before, can you imagine what Duba's is about after September 11? Now the group has been reconstituted because Dick is in South Carolina, Duncan is still there, who celebrated with Nancy on Thursday his 89th birthday. Lester DeKoster is still there, in his mid-80s, hale and hearty. But, we've added a little support on my side. I brought Howard VanTill to the table, so we have an enlightened scientist. And my dear friend, Bud Ridder, of many, many years. And Clarence Boomsma, a respected and sensitive and intelligent pastor of the Christian Reformed Church for many years. I run with these guys in their 80s, it makes me feel young. Last Tuesday I think it was Howard who said something about revelation just doesn't fall out of heaven so that you have a book, and my dear friend Lester said, "That's exactly what you have. If you don't have that, you don't have anything."

Now, Lester has a philosophically trained mind of brilliant capacity with a debater's skills. Of course, he was not only debating, but baiting a bit. So, when asked, "All right, I have the absolute word of God, divinely inspired in every word, and my Muslim brother has the Koran, claiming even a higher level of inspiration for his book, what do we have here? An impasse?" Lester said, "No, it depends on who was the author."

"Well, who was the author of this book?" (The Bible)

"The eternal God."

"Who was the author of this book?" (The Koran)

"Satan."

Now, Lester with his lovely wife Ruth, will be listening to this sermon. They have Christ Community preaching for breakfast on Tuesday morning, so that he can always make some relative comment on Tuesday noon, and of course, with his incisive thinking and his acuity, he is always right on. He knows exactly where I have deviated from the faith.

Lester knew what he was doing. He was setting us up. If you hold that this (the Bible) is the word of God, every word, then every other book has to be a false book. It has to be the witness of a lie. So, Lester proceeded, "If you don't have that, what do you have?" And I was so delighted with my friend, Bud Ridder, who swallowed hard, pushing away every inclination and every instruction and every bit of knowledge he had in his whole life, saying, "My authority is in myself."

Of course, that's exactly what Lester was trying to point out. When you give up the authority of the book or, if you were a Roman Catholic, the authority of the Church, or if you were in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the authority of the tradition, then you are out at sea. Then you are your own authority. And you can go across the spectrum of the Protestant or Catholic or Orthodox churches today and you will find, when you press the issue, that there will be fudging all along the line. But, at Duba's table, one never gets away with fudging. And so, my friend, Bud Ridder, had to say, "I am my own authority," and I cheered. Because that's precisely where we are. We have made the move into pluralism, dear friends.

But, I want to take you a cut below that. Not only have we become pluralists because well, nice folks like us, after all, should be pluralists. We're nice people. We like to get along with other people. Who wants to say to somebody else, "You're lost," or "You're damned," or "You're on the wrong track?" We're decent people, civil and good neighbors. We're just plain congenial folks. Shouldn't we be pluralists? No. It's not enough. We ought to be pluralists on the basis of our deepest insight and that insight is this - that finally we are the creators of our own vision and our own place to stand.

Now, don't hear me say that you begin life with a virgin mind and a blank tablet and you start creating this thing from scratch. Of course not. Grace Elizabeth and Allie, who were baptized today, are immersed in a story. They are surrounded with the love of those who tell the story. They are part of the community of faith, a particular tradition whose window on God is that beautiful face of Jesus. They are being shaped and, beyond that, they have a storybook in which they are being nurtured in this community and in their homes. And beyond that, they are growing into a world of experience, a fascinating world of expanding experience and broadening horizons. And so, from a tradition, from a sacred story, from a family and a community, and in the gaining of experience, finally they make up their mind through the use of their mind, through critical rationality, which is the particular gift and fruit of the Western tradition. That is the thing that is being terrorized today. That is the greatest threat to us, to lose our gift and our capacity to think with our minds and make up our minds and sift the evidence and the experience before us with our critical rationality.

So, it is not as though everyone is on his or her own, starting out fresh and having to come to some kind of major conclusions, no. We are shaped, we are guided, we are nurtured. Finally, in the end, it is not this book. It is not the authority of Mother Church. It is not 2000 years of tradition. It is not the word of some pastor or counselor. Finally, until you can stand on your own and say, "This I believe, for these reasons, in light of this experience," until you come to that point, you have not crossed the Rubicon.

Crossing the Rubicon is a matter of determining the source of authority. Once you cross the Rubicon, you are free to think. You are free to think about religion; you are free to think about theological questions; you are free to think about social, ethical issues. You are able to take the witness of science over against the question of sexual orientation. You are able to carry on a conversation about the question of abortion. You are able to discuss Planned Parenthood. You are able to think about all of those issues that are right at the nub of our present existential situation. You are free; you are free to think. You can gather the data. You can get the best information possible. You could become aware of your own biases and prejudices. You can lay it all on the table, and then you can make up your mind and you can be committed and dedicated to a point of view which you cannot do when you say, "Therefore, I have absolute truth. Therefore, my religious understanding is synonymous with the truth. Therefore, my decision on social, ethical questions is the only possibility for a thinking religious and pious person."

What I am saying to you, I am saying as clearly and simply as I can, and I want you to know it is a very radical point of view.

Last Sunday evening, after a very busy and significant weekend, Christine Spong called and said, "Dick, Jack and I are tired. We would like simply to come over and sit on the bluff with you and Nancy and watch the sunset and eat leftovers." And we did. Jack Spong had been exposed to you in large assembly and various

small groups, he met with the Trustees, encountered many of you one-on-one, and immediately sitting down, he said, "Dick, I want you to know that Christ Community is a very special place. I want you to know that in all of my world travels, in all of my involvement with the church, out of all of my experience over the years, what you have there is rare. That community of people is rare. Theologically, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally mature." And he said, "You know, I'm a disincarnate bishop at this point, and I need concrete laboratories. I see Christ Community as a place that has the possibility because of where it has come to move into the next phase of what the religious community must be." He even offered to come back and be with us for a month and help us, suggested that we gather some other similar people, maybe bring in a Muslim imam, a Buddhist monk. Let us begin to live concretely what we say we believe, bringing our gift to the table and learning, as well, from the wisdom and the insight of others.

My sermon title is "This is the Time and This is the Place." Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Light doesn't go out and wage warfare, but light is what it is, and it illumines. He said, "You are the salt of the earth." The whole world doesn't need to be a salt block, but the world needs the light sprinkling of salt in order that it may bring forth all of its richness and flavor. Jesus said, "Love your enemies. Be like God. The sun shines on the good and the evil. The rain falls on the gardens of all people. You be like that." The word in the old, traditional translation is "Be ye perfect, as God is perfect," but that too easily takes on a moralistic tone. The word really in the Greek original means complete, whole, fulfilling its purpose and its end. Be therefore mature, complete, as God is mature and complete.

I don't know the implications of what it means to move into the next form of existence of the Church. But, I do know that we have made a significant move. We know why we have made it, and a thoughtful analysis and critical understanding will demonstrate that the only authority, finally, is the conviction of our own faith and our own vision which we share in community and support one another. I don't know the implications of this, but I know this -I have time and I have the energy, if you are willing to find out the next orbit. This is the time, folks, and this is the place.

References:

Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of the World Order*. Touchstone, 1997.