

Who Needs a Good-For-Nothing Church?

Pentecost XX

Mark 2:13-17

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In an article in *The New York Times Magazine* of last week, Andrew Sullivan, an excellent writer, makes a point of the fact that it is fine that we have been cautioned against targeting Islam as a religion responsible for what has happened in the world, and that is laudable, he says. But he writes, "The only problem with this otherwise laudable effort is that it doesn't hold up under inspection. The religious dimension of the conflict is central to its meaning. The words of Osama bin Laden are saturated with religious argument and theological language. Whatever the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is, it is fanatically religious."

He goes on to say, "In that sense, this surely is a religious war, but not of Islam versus Christianity and Judaism. Rather, it is a war of fundamentalism against faiths of all kinds that are at peace with freedom and modernity. This war even has far gentler versions in America's own religious conflicts between newer, more virulent strands of Christian fundamentalism and mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism. These conflicts have ancient roots, but they seem to be gaining new force as modernity spreads and deepens. They are our new wars of religion and their victims are, in all likelihood, going to mount with each passing year."

And one more sentence from Sullivan: "It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation, and our bland attempts to ignore this, to speak of this violence as if it did not have religious roots, is some kind of denial. We don't want to denigrate religions as such, and so we deny that religion is at the heart of this. But we would understand this conflict better, perhaps, if we first acknowledge that religion is responsible in some way, and then figure how and why."

This is a religious war, and religion is at the heart of it, and until we understand that, our world will continue reeling from one disaster to another, for religion gives people a sense of identity and it creates community, and we learn from such scholars as Karen Armstrong and others who have analyzed the present situation that in a world that is disoriented, full of confusion for so many people who have

their old ways disrupted and who have moved off their lands, there is a tremendous appeal by a fundamentalist-type faith that has an absolute faith structure. It has a sacred text that is infallible, and it has a way of life to which absolute obedience is demanded. This has a certain allure, and it has worked in our world and in our day to an amazing extent so that what we have is not the problem of Islam, *per se*, but we have the problem of fundamentalists religion that purports to have absolute truth and demands absolute obedience. It denies the function of reason, the mind, and the intellect, and it denies human freedom and the possibility of a maturing of the human being. That is the struggle today, and that was the struggle in the time of Jesus.

Jesus was a Jew. Jesus never intended to start a new religion. Everything that Jesus was and taught was in the compass of his Judaism, and yet, what he counseled and how he acted and what he embodied contradicted some of the things that were intrinsic in his Jewish faith. The insights that he had, the way of life that he lived, eventuated in another world religion because the old containers couldn't hold it, and so while it was not his intention to move from his own native Judaism and be the founder of a Christian church, what he saw was so dynamic, was so electric, was so powerful that it shattered the forms and structures of that old covenant faith. And that is where we are today. That is precisely where we are today. There is a continuum from Osama bin Laden and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists to Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, and at the other softer end, mainline Protestantism and Catholicism. There is no radical division between the most bland and placid Protestantism in this country and the extreme of Falwell and the terrorism of bin Laden. Any point along that continuum that you stop is an arbitrary stopping place. The problem is religion. The problem is absolutistic religion that denies critical thinking and hinders the maturing of the human personality into one that can make critical judgments and find the way to celebrate life in this world in all of the light of the knowledge that we have of the emerging, evolving drama of the cosmos of which we are a part.

As Andrew Sullivan says, we don't want to denigrate religion, and we don't want to target a particular religion, and so we dance around the issue. But, I want to tell you, and we have acknowledged that here for some time past, religion is powerful. Religion is dangerous. Religion is volatile. It becomes an instrument in the hand of the unscrupulous or the unaware for the creation of hell on earth.

Who needs a good for nothing church? That is, a church that has no axe to grind, a church that has no institutional ulterior motives, a church that is committed not to the binding down of the soul and the hindering of the maturing of the individual, but a church, a congregation, a community of faith that would seek to lead its people into human maturity, that refuses to promise a comfort it cannot deliver, and refuses to claim that it has the absolute word of God which it does not, apart from some human understanding and interpretation. Who needs that kind of church?

By God, the world needs that kind of church. And until the world finds that kind of church, religion will continue to be a dangerous and disruptive and hell-creating power on earth. It is time we call a spade a spade and recognize the volatility of religion and its demonic potential, and recognize that until we get honest and acknowledge our humanity, the limitedness and the tentativeness and the provisionalness of being human, of the fact that to be human is to be in history, to be in history is to be denied absolutes, to be in history is a call to compassion, to walk together and to find our way together into a better future marked by peace.

Jesus shattered the structures of Judaism, not because he took off against his covenant faith, but because what he saw, what he experienced, what he could not and would not deny was so electric and so full of dynamite that he transformed the face of the earth. And we're there again.

Who needs a good for nothing church?

The world does, by God.