

When Religion Goes Bad – Micah 6:8, Ephesians 4:1-3 – January 10, 2010

(Watch clip) That is a question many young people are asking today and maybe some of you as well. When we look around we see religious people of all different faiths doing things that make us question whether the world might be a better place without it. In fact, that is exactly what some of the critics of religion are saying – particularly some of the hardcore, vocal atheists who are advocating that it is time to move beyond religion because it is a dangerous thing that produces more suffering than it does good. That will be the subject we wrestle with this morning as we continue our sermon series on The Case for God in Today's World.

Now I want to acknowledge right from the start that the critics of religion do have some valid criticisms to make that we cannot ignore. In fact, I suspect you have struggled with them as well – no matter whether you are a person of faith or a critic yourself. I want to briefly focus on three of those criticisms this morning about when religion goes bad. The first is when religion is used to oppress people usually in an attempt to maintain the status quo. You know what I mean - when certain people in power use that power to push other people down. Unfortunately, that has been a reality in India through Hinduism for many years with the religion-based caste system.

Fortunately, that has begun to change some but I am not so sure that is the case in the Middle East – countries such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan to name just a few – that use the Muslim faith and the power associated with it to oppress women and others. Again, you know what I mean as we see how the

women must dress, whether they can vote, drive and many other things. And unfortunately, we have not been immune to abuse or oppression done in the name of religion in this country either.

The battle over slavery in this country in the 1860's was in part fueled by certain interpretations of the scriptures. Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States of America at the time, said slavery was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts. In the south at that time, many sermons that were preached reflected this very view.

And women's rights to vote in this country were similarly influenced by Christian biblical interpretations as well. Fortunately, that changed in 1920 but even today women in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and several conservative denominations are not allowed to serve as pastors, leaders or even Sunday school teachers where there are both men and women in the same class because of certain texts in the scriptures. In two weeks we will look at a few of these difficult and challenging passages but for now let's move on to the next way religion has been used to take advantage of certain people – often times weak or gullible people.

All I need to do is mention people like Warren Jeffs of the Fundamentalist Church of the Latter Day Saints to explain the folks of whom I speak – often time pastors who in the name of God have taken advantage of others. Jeffs is the self-

proclaimed prophet of this splinter group of the Mormon Church who was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. He eventually was caught, convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison but not before the abuse of many young women who were told they must submit their bodies to him and other adult men in the group because it was the will of God.

While this is one of the more extreme cases, we all know it is not an isolated issue. We think of the scandal that has plagued the Catholic Church and other denominations as well. And beyond sexual immorality issues we also have those pastors who have taken advantage of people with money too. Now let me pause here for a minute and quote Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, who tells us that there are 586 thousand clergy in the U.S. and the number of people who act in these ways is very, very small. But of course, every time one does, we hear about it in the media – as we should – because it is taking advantage of people in the name of God and that is wrong. In fact, it is sickening to all of us I have no doubt.

However, I fear that those who are rejecting religion today - particularly the Christian religion - are unfortunately reacting just as much to everyday Christians – both pastors and lay people – who they meet on a regular basis. Christians who struggle with presenting the same kind of faith and action that Jesus did and instead present one that is more narrow-minded, ignorant, judgmental, even mean-spirited. You have no doubt met people like this and may well have struggled with that kind of faith yourself. This kind of Christianity does very little to

help draw people to Christ and instead repels people from following him and his ways all too often.

In fact, I fear most people who decide to become atheists, agnostics or at least stay non-believers do so in large part because of their gut reaction to certain Christians. I remember a sad story I heard from one of my youth in Alabama once she graduated and went off to college. Her first roommate was a non-believer – maybe even an atheist as a direct result of an experience she had in a Christian church.

She grew up in this church and had spent a great deal of time there as a child and youth. But when her mother passed away from cancer when she was in high school, a member of the church came up to her at the funeral and actually asked her had she prayed hard enough or believed enough. For if she had her mother might still be alive today. Well can you blame her for not wanting any part of that? I am happy to tell you that the young woman who shared the story with us was doing all in her power to show her roommate – who had become her best friend – that not all Christians act and believe that way.

Yes, many are hypocrites. No actually we are all hypocrites – myself included – for I never fully live up to the things I try to preach and teach each and every week. For the Christian moral vision as spelled out to us in the scriptures is something we strive for but never completely reach. Hopefully we are getting closer and closer – something the founder of Methodism John Wesley – called moving onto perfection. But we will never ever get there which makes each and every one of us who claims to be Christian hypocrites. For we say we do one

thing but do something else. But who doesn't? Unless you have an extremely low moral vision, then I believe even non-believers and atheists are hypocrites too.

I don't want to offend anyone but the truth is we all struggle with this don't we? I know I do and have a son who has enjoyed pointing that struggle out to me over the years. In fact, I can remember almost to the day when he learned the word hypocrite and what it meant and it quickly became one of his favorites for many years. When a word comes out of my mouth that shouldn't – but does on occasion – or when I go above the speed limit he has been quick to remind me that I stand up in front of all those people every Sunday telling them to do what is right and good and here I am doing what is wrong and bad. I am so happy to have him with me – for what – another seven more months and counting. Of course, I am just kidding. But I hope you get what I am trying to say.

We desperately want to live up to God's hopes and expectations of us as people of faith and the body of Christ but it is not easy. I think about the two scriptures we heard read this morning that give us just a sample of what God requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God and to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is not easy stuff.

According to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we are expected to not only love our friends and our neighbors but our enemies as well. We are asked to pray for those who persecute us, to turn the other cheek, to forgive not seventy times but seventy times seven, to feed those who are hungry and clothe those

who are naked, to put others' needs above ours and most importantly to love and the list goes on and on - obviously setting the Christian moral vision incredibly high – our moral vision as children of God and followers of Christ.

And not just when we feel like it but every day – twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Once again, we fall short – regularly – but that does not mean we stop trying – that we allow those who give religion a bad name to define who we are as Christians and the church. Instead hopefully we get up each day anew – asking God to help us move one step closer to truly living the Christian moral vision given to us. Some days we are going to blow it and other days we going to get a little bit closer to that goal.

I started out this morning talking about some of the examples of when religion has gone bad that atheists love to point out but would like to end with examples of when religion does good because fortunately there are many. Take the issue of slavery for a minute again. The anti-slavery movements both in this country and England were not dominated by atheists but by Christians. These believers reasoned that since we are all created equal in the eyes of God, no one has the right to rule another without consent. If that is not attempting to live up to the Christian moral vision, I don't know what is.

I think of the how religion has oppressed women and yet I stand before you as your pastor having been ordained for over 15 years in a denomination that has ordained women for over fifty. Now that does not make us a problem-free, perfect denomination. Women are still playing catch up and we have our share of pastors who have fallen from grace as well. But I think of all the

wonderful ministries of the United Methodist church and many other denominations who are the first on the scene to help people in need. I think of the colleges, hospitals, missions and ministries that the church has established over the years that do live up to the Christian moral vision. And I think of the many wonderful things going on right here at St. John's. We are not perfect. We have a long way to go – some of us further than others. But I believe with all my heart that most of us know how much God loves us and what God requires of us in return.

How do I know? Because I witness it on a regular basis. In fact, all I have to do is pull out this week's newsletter and read about how this congregation faithfully responded to the Advent Conspiracy just this past December to explain what I mean. If you have any doubts about this church or the religion being practiced here please take a moment to read this article which I believe just scratches the surface. And we are just one church among many in this community who are living out the gospel.

I think of the Glen-Ed pantry, Faith-In-Action, Meals on Wheels and Habitat for Humanity – four of the most active agencies in this community that are all faith-based. What might happen in this area – in this nation for that matter – if the atheists got their way and we just did away with religion in this country all together? I ponder all the work this church alone has done in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina over the past four years. People who took their vacations to go sleep on the floor in a church and work for five days straight in the heat to help people they did not even know. And they could not have done it without the

financial and prayer support of the rest of you who could not go. Do we really want to do away with that? Is it really time to drive the nail into the coffin of religion?

Once again, we are not perfect but I do believe that we are at least attempting to be the beacons of faith and service that God has called us to be as together we strive to shine Christ's light and love into the world. Yes, there have been and will continue to be bad things done in the name of God and religion. But there are more people of faith – followers of Christ - who are doing good things, wonderful things, loving things all because of God's love for them and their love for God and God's people.

When people look at you what do they see? Are they drawn to the Christ that you represent or repelled by him? Please never forget that they are watching. They may well not believe in your God yet but they can't help but be moved by your actions, your care for them and your love – hopefully all in the name and love of God. Amen.