

“Faith, Fanaticism and Shades of Gray”

Luke 10:25-28, 11:37-44/Isaiah 58:2-9

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(A couple people dressed as street prophets with sandwich boards; “Jesus is returning soon,” “Prepare to meet God,” etc. greet people as they come to worship.)

I. Scripture

Read Gospel: Luke 10:25-28; 11:37-44

II. Introduction

Back in the 70’s our girl’s high school basketball team was very good. Every year they went to the playoffs. In 1976 they won the state championship. In 1977 they were back in a semi-final game for the state championship.

The girls had played all their games in 1977 on Tuesday and Thursday nights. The semi-final game that year was on a Friday night. And that’s when the controversy started. One of the starters on the girl’s team belonged to the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Hebert Armstrong. A foundational belief of this Christian sect was to observe the Old Testament Sabbath; only worship and rest from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Playing basketball was a violation of the Sabbath.

After talking with her parents and the coach, the girl decided not to play. We thought she was crazy. This was the state tournament.....and people play basketball on Friday nights. Though I was active in my Presbyterian Church in high school, I thought this choice by my classmate was over the top.....too religious.....too legalistic.....approaching fanaticism.....just too weird.

Now I look back, and I question my think-I-know- more-than-I-do high school judgment. Was it really a fanatical choice to not play....or was it faithfulness?

When I first thought about this sermon topic, “faith and fanaticism,” I thought it would be straight-forward.....that it would be easy to identify religious fanaticism. Now that I’ve thought about it some I know it’s not always so easy. One person’s faith, can be another person’s fanaticism.

I choose to pray before I eat.....to say grace. Even when we eat out at restaurants I say grace.....pray in public. Is it faith, or fanaticism?

Street prophets proclaim the end of the world, the return of Jesus, and God’s salvation. Is it faith.....or fanaticism?

Before Vincent Van Gogh pursued painting he was appointed as a temporary missionary to a poor coal mining community in Belgium. Once there Van Gogh quickly left all the modest comforts afforded a missionary in that poor community and lived with and as the people. He went into the mines, became stained with coal dust, and developed the coal dust cough. He gave away all but one set of clothes. He lived in a hut, slept on a straw mattress, and for most meals ate tea and bread. He lost weight and struggled with illness. Van Gogh saw it as living the Christian faith with the people. When his missionary superiors came to check on the situation they were appalled at Van Gogh's condition, and dismissed him for "undermining the dignity of priesthood." Now were Van Gogh's extreme actions faith, or fanaticism?

The late Jewish Rabbi and scholar Abraham Heschel was asked by a journalist why he was demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Heschel said, "I am here because I cannot pray. Whenever I open the prayer book, I see before me images of children burning from napalm." "We shouldn't pray," he went on to say, "while we remain silent about the atrocities committed by our government in our name." Demonstrating against government policy.....is it faith or fanaticism? (Christian Century, July 12, 2011, p. 8)

Volunteers at Trinity Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut, recently washed the feet of 40 homeless people. They also massaged and put lotion on the feet of these homeless people, and gave them new socks and shoes. A nurse was on hand to address any medical issues. Are those church members fanatics, or faithful? (Ibid)

The Board of Trustees at Goshen College, a Mennonite school, recently voted to no longer play the national anthem at sporting events. The board said the anthem's lyrics glorify war, and are offensive to the school pacifist tradition. The board went on to say "the school's allegiance should be to Christ rather than the country." Most at the Goshen College say the action is faithful. Some say it is fanatic. (Christian Century, July 12, 2011, p.16)

III. Biblical and Theological Reflection

Some actions in the name of religion seem clearly fanatical; blowing up clinics that provide abortion options for women, flying airplanes into buildings, and the hate speech of neo-Nazi groups in northern Idaho. And there's always a danger that religion can become fanatical when it's supported by the power of the state; the crusades of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, the Spanish Inquisition, the 30 year war in 17th century Europe. And the uncritical support of the extreme political right by conservative religious groups in this country should also give us some concern (but that another sermon).

It seems to me, however, that in many cases it's not easy to discern faith or fanaticism. It seems a little fuzzy.....there seems to be shades of gray. So as I started thinking about faith and fanaticism I decided it best not to come up with some type of exact "litmus test." Rather I thought it best to come up with questions to think about and discuss. And these questions are for Christian faith and fanaticism. I'll let the rabbis and imams address their own respective faiths.

So the questions are:

#1-Theological: Is the expression of Christian faith grounded in the gospel?

#2-Ethical: Does the practice of Christian faith follow the way of Jesus?

#3-Scriptural: Does the practice of Christian faith express the full counsel of the Bible?

Question #1-The theological question: Is the expression of Christian faith grounded in the gospel?

Often when people think about fanaticism they contrast it with "nominalism." A nominal Christian is someone who is a Christian in name only; no real belief, no real practice, no real Christian way of life. And a fanatic is someone who is thought to over-believe and over-practice Christianity. So in this understanding the best kind of Christian would be one in the middle; believe but not too much, practice but not too much, follow Jesus but not too much. It's the same challenge I face when I'm trying to grill salmon on cedar planks on the grill: Too little and it's raw; too much and planks catch on fire and the salmon burns. It's a challenge to get it in between.

But the problem with the "fanatic-nominal-but not too much" understanding of the Christian gospel is that.....it's not the gospel. Rather it is a type of moral improvement discipline that I do myself. Fanatics believe they are more righteous because of how they live their lives. They earn God's love and favor because of what they do. They are proud and self-righteous, and feel justified to judge others. What follows are various forms of abuse, exclusion and oppression (the very opposite of Christian faith). And this is a "turn off" to the Christian faith for others. So they choose to "believe, but not too much," so not to become like the fanatics.

But what if the gospel really starts with God, and not me? What if salvation is about the power and love of God in Jesus Christ to forgive and heal brokenness, and not about what I do? And what if it's not earned, but a gift? And what if it can only be received by faith? Such a faith would be.....profoundly humbling. **In fact, of course, that's exactly what the gospel is; the gift of God's grace for everyone, received by faith.** The problem with fanatical expressions of Christian faith is not that people are too committed to the gospel. Rather it's that they are not committed to the real gospel enough. So Question #1 is: Is the practice of faith really grounded in the Christian gospel of grace?

Question #2-The ethical question: Does the practice of Christian faith lead to following the way of Jesus?

Religious fanaticism is proud and self-righteous, and leads to injustice and oppression. In our text from Isaiah 58: 2-9, the prophet challenges the false religion he sees all around him. He sees the religious busyness at the temple, but knows it is only a veneer that covers the ethical corruption underneath. They call on God, but don't really know or believe in God. So amidst the busy temple Isaiah declares God's word; true faith results in a way of life that reflects God's heart. Living as God's people includes social justice, mercy, and compassion for the poor and powerless. Freely loved by God, God's people are to freely love in return.

About 600 years after Isaiah Jesus incarnates the heart of God in his teaching and life. In our gospel reading in Luke 10 and 11 the way of faith is summarized in the words we know: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) And we see that's why Jesus gets in constant conflict with the Pharisees, the religious fanatics of his day (Luke 11:37-44); as in Isaiah there's a proud, religious busyness that misses the deeper things of God and love.

Christian faith becomes fanatical, wrong and dangerous when it is not grounded in love. Reflecting the well-known words of I Corinthians 13, Christian faith is right when it is patient and kind, rejoices in truth, and bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. Christian faith becomes fanatical and wrong when it is envious, proud, boastful, rude, hard-headed, irritable, and rejoices in what is clearly wrong. When Jesus calls followers to "pick up your cross and follow me," (Mark 8:34) it is not a call to fanaticism. Rather it is a call to live in the radical faith, hope and love of Jesus.

So Question #2 is: Does the practice of Christian faith demonstrate love of God and neighbor?

And the final question, the scriptural question, Question #3-Does the practice of Christian faith reflect the full counsel of scripture?

Very simply, often fanaticism will take a verse, or part of a verse, out of context and claim it as authority for specific action. Sometimes I find myself in crazy debates with people over the interpretation of a specific scripture. It is often a frustrating experience, as the person is closed to understanding the scripture in light of the context, and the main theological context of the Bible. I also try to be open so to not practice the same closed-mindedness.

I know interpreting the Bible is hard. And I know that it's easier to just interpret one verse. But our desire for truth, and the call to follow Jesus in God's world should encourage us to wrestle with interpreting scripture, and to be cautious of beliefs and practices supported by one or few verses in the Bible. As an example, our "street

prophets,” who greeted you today, are sure that Jesus is returning, and that the world is ending soon. It would be good for people in this type of fanatical faith to consider Jesus’ words about not knowing when the end will come (Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7), and the importance of sharing the good news of the gospel (Acts 1:8; Luke 24:48; Matthew 28:18-20).

Question #3: Does the practice of Christian faith reflect the fullness of scripture?

IV. Conclusion

In his book, The Reason for God, Presbyterian pastor and writer Tim Keller writes:

“Perhaps the biggest deterrent to Christian faith for the average person today is the shadow of fanaticism. Many nonbelievers have friends or relatives who have become “born again,” and seem to have gone off the deep end. They soon begin to express loudly their disapproval of various groups and sectors of our society... ..especially movies and television, the Democratic party, homosexuals, evolutionists, activist judges, members of other religions, and the values taught in public schools. When arguing for the truth of their faith they often appear intolerant and self-righteous. This is fanaticism for many people, and if that’s Christianity they don’t want any part of it.” (pp. 57-8)

Though not always easy to define, religious fanaticism is a perversion of the gospel, fails to reflect love for God and neighbor, and twists scripture to give authority to its own purposes. It has always been a terrible witness to the Christian faith. It still is today. But faithful lives.....lives that are more than “some belief, but not too much”.....these lives are powerful.

Jeanne and I recently watched a French film entitled “Of Gods and Men.” It is based on the true story of Trappist monks in an Algerian abbey during the Islamic revolution in 1996. In the story the eight monks live a pious life of service in the old abbey in the Algerian countryside. Their peaceful days revolve around praying, chanting, reading, farming, raising bees, and serving the small and impoverished village of Muslims who live down the hill. The monks provide the everyday support of medical care, clothing and food. They share in the life of the community. They know the villagers by name and share in their celebrations. They love and help them in their difficult lives. Any barriers between East and West, Muslim and Christian are easily crossed, as there is respect for each other.

But the peace of the village and abbey is disrupted by a fundamentalist Islamic revolution against the corrupt government. A team of foreign construction workers are murdered, as is a Muslim girl for not wearing a head scarf. The government knows the Christian monks might be next, so they press and harass them to leave and serve

elsewhere. The monks then begin to discuss and pray about whether to leave for safety, or stay and support the people in the village they love. The monks are on different pages. They discuss their different choices, and listen to each other. They pray, chant and worship together in their little chapel. It is beautiful. In a final discussion as the intensity and threats are rising, one of the monks says, "The Shepherd did not abandon his flock." In that they all hear the word of God, and they all decide to stay.

As the story draws to a close, the Islamic revolutionaries break into the monastery at night and take 6 of the 8 monks hostage. Two were able to hide. And in the final scene we see the monks walking at gunpoint over the snow into the mist and fog of the forest and mountains.

Harassed by the corrupt government, and facing a real threats of violence from the Islamic fundamentalists.....was it fanaticism to stay? Those monks believed in the gospel of grace.....they loved God and neighbors.....and they wrestled with scripture. I believe it was an act of faith.....and a witness to the love of God.