

**YOU ASKED FOR IT:
“CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING FUNDAMENTALIST”**

A Sermon by Rev. Richard Clewell

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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SCRIPTURE TEXT: 1 Peter 3: 8-17

In the course of this “You Asked for It” summer series, the question was asked, “How do you talk to a fundamentalist, to a born-again Christian?” This question would appear to imply that such a person is a different breed of cat from other human beings. Are they so heavenly minded, they’re no earthly good? In our day of polarization in politics and religion we too often adopt the stance that someone (or I) am either right or wrong. Perhaps this is why we are hesitant to engage others whose faith is expressed in different ways from ours. Are we afraid we will be judged or will fail to have the correct response or answer?

This morning’s Scripture text from the first epistle of Peter provides a framework which may help us better understand and express our faith experience as we engage other Christians or secular humanists or people in general. (Read 1 Peter 3: 8-17). In this passage Peter points to the appropriate relations for Christians with one another as well as with the larger society where the faithful are often alienated and sometimes suffer for expressing their faith. As you remember, Peter had differences with the Apostle Paul over perceptions of what being a Christian entailed. It was through engagement, listening and an on-going process of prayer and discernment that his outlook changed and his faith continued to develop. Here Peter encourages the Christians of his day to “always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in you” with gentleness and respect, not petulance and in judgment of others. Often our stereotypes of others as born-againers, fundamentalists, or as agnostics or atheists for that matter, can get in our way.

What is a fundamentalist? Fundamentalism is shaped by a central belief that the Bible is God’s literal word, without error in all things, a changeless theological handbook and moral guide, clear and unambiguous in its teachings. In addition fundamentalists typically emphasize salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone through a personal experience of being “born again” as the only way to relationship with God. They believe that salvation necessarily results in a piety of personal purity which is the sanctified way to live for all Christians as perceived in the scriptures. In fundamentalism being prepared for heaven is paramount although there is wide diversity in the manner in which “born-again” Christians see the work of God in this world . (i.e. Jim Wallis, Tim LeHaye, James Dobson)

I want to share a confession with you this morning – I am a recovering fundamentalist whose faith has gone through a long process of change in the course of my life and encounters with people and events. Though baptized in the Presbyterian

Church as a baby, the fights between the liberals and fundamentalists in the 30's led my parents to leave the denomination and become involved in an independent fundamentalist church. I had a genuine conversion experience at age ten – a “born-again” moment. Through high school and into college I felt the call to ministry although I tried hard to avoid it. I attended Dallas Theological Seminary first, a bastion of fundamentalism, where in discussion with other students I first questioned a strictly literal interpretation of the scriptures which were considered inerrant as well as the premillennial return of Christ espoused. Attending a Presbyterian US church provided me with some balance and openness to other perspectives.

Upon graduation, I was called as a youth director to a conservative Presbyterian church in Minnesota. There I worked with the Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry in a year-long process to prepare for ordination. My horizons were broadened as I was engaged in discussions of reformed theology and polity with a range of ministers with widely diverse perspectives, and because of Presbytery's suspicion of this perceived fundamentalist, after lengthy hours of written and oral examination, was finally approved for ordination on the floor of presbytery after lengthy debate.

After three years as associate pastor relating to troubled youth in a changing culture, I was called to active duty as an army chaplain and within the year was involved in the Vietnam conflict. There in the face of death and meaningless chaos, any easy answers went out the window and overwhelming experiences raised basic faith questions about what was really important in the scheme of life. Immersed in the ultimate evil of warfare, no dying soldier asked if he was going to heaven or someplace else. Rather, they would grab my hand and request that I stay with them so they would not die alone. My own ideas about right and wrong, divine grace and judgment, human choice, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation were radically changed in the crucible of combat.

In this experience I also was exposed to other faith viewpoints of fellow rabbis, pastors and priests serving as chaplains with me. The most spiritual person I have ever met was a Buddhist monk I encountered in my civic action work with the Vietnamese people. I came to believe that God was indispensable to all human creation, not just a small segment of Christians of one narrow vision or perspective. It also became my conviction that Christians are called to make a difference in this world rather than just preparing themselves and others for heaven.

After five years of active duty in a system which claimed moral values but violated most in terms of self-interest, I resigned my commission and went back to a combined graduate education program in the clinical pastoral field at the Menniger Foundation and Dubuque Theological Seminary to learn how better to relate to people and to undergo my own process of further growth and healing. This enriching experience provided further encounters with other faith understandings, exposure to psychological insights, and the educational interface with a faithful lesbian clergywoman who was committed to her Lord. Another stereotype was shattered.

In my twenty-five years as a Veterans Administration chaplain, I learned much more about the traumatic aftermath of warfare and importance of people reworking their beliefs and assumptions in order to move from survival mode to living with trust and hope. In a doctoral program at McCormick Seminary I was challenged to expand my theological horizons. In private practice counseling, I came to understand that human talents, contributions, issues and struggles have little to do with gender or sexual identity except when others call natural orientation a sin and stand in misplaced judgment on others.

I'm thankful that this church has a support group called Beyond Acceptance where individuals and families dealing with such issues can do so in an environment of love and support. I am most thankful that today I serve in a church where people don't have to have it all together, where questions are encouraged, and where faith growth and openness to new ways of thinking about and knowing God are nurtured.

So, how does a person talk to a fundamentalist or "born-again" Christian? Peter's words in our epistle text are very helpful. For me as a "born-again" many times Christian, those words overcome the stereotypes which so often get in our way. Peter states, "Finally, all of you (i.e. Christians) have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, respond with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing." How different this is from what we hear coming from current religious debate steeped in an "us versus them" mentality. These words speak to faithful Christian behavior toward fellow Christians and the larger society as well. Peter's ethical injunction is set within the providential context of a call which includes a present obligation to be faithful to Christ and a promise of blessing even in the face of rejection and suffering. This was important for the first century church and is still important today. Our calling is not to win an argument or to prove our superiority of faith. Our calling is not to fear or to be intimidated (v.14) but to follow Christ as Lord and to share eagerly our faith experience and hope in seeking peace. Most importantly we share our faith with "gentleness and respect" (v.16) for others.

So, how does one relate to a fundamentalist Christian today? It's hard, I know to see the concept of the Christian community as a unified body of believers, especially with the present melding of religion and politics. Author and pastor Bruce McClaren reflects, "The name of Jesus, whose life and message resonated with acceptance, welcome, and inclusion, has too often become a symbol of elitism, exclusion, and aggression." In contrast, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the definition of "neighbor" has to be expanded to include all of God's children, including those of different social classes, races, creeds, and even political affiliations. A quote "born-again" Christian is not an alien but a human being included in the household of God. As with anyone else, we are to share our faith and hope that God has given and continues to give us in Jesus Christ without fear or the need to convince them that we are right. It is not a battle; it is a gift of witness in word and deed. If they accept our faith expression we have found a new relationship to be nourished; if they reject the gift

of ourselves, we need not fear if the Spirit of Christ leads our heart. Peter's words (v.14) "not to fear what they fear" are insightful into the nature of idolatry. Idolatry is not only the worship of the wrong God, but also is the fear of the wrong powers – it is to give the non-gods the power that should belong only to God – to frighten us, to make us awe-struck, to victimize us by faithlessness. Such fears, I believe, hide themselves in guises such as excessive nationalism which may be the other face of excessive fears of others; egotism which is a game we play to fend off the fear of our own insignificance; the need to constantly assert the superiority of our race or our faith or our way of living which masks our fear of others – that they may take away what we hold most dear; that what they hold most dear is better than what we have.

We do not have to fear when we have experienced the grace and love of God in Christ Jesus. You don't have to be a theologian; you don't have to have the answers to all possible questions. In sharing your experience you offer a gift. The other person can choose to accept it graciously or to reject it or, possibly, even be abusive. The only issue which is critical for you or me is have we been faithful to God's calling in our actions, behavior and witness?

In my own journey, I have been born anew many times and expect that my faith will continue to change and hopefully mature. I am now much more concerned with what happens here than in the hereafter. I am certain that God's grace is for all people and that Christ still desires us to make a genuine difference in the world system. I believe silence is not an option but by speaking and acting honestly and powerfully on what we hold dear is the only way to transform injustice and oppression which God calls us to address now.

I know that loving your neighbor is proof of love for God. Christ enjoined us that we love one another. We need to hear this with clarity and meaning. The unity believers share rests in something beyond doctrinal agreement or institutional relatedness. It is anchored in our experienced love of God in Christ, which keeps us together despite our differences and links us with all disciples – past, present, and future – in the church which exists and serves in the world in Jesus' name. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)"

We need also to be clear about what this means. This love which Christ describes is more than an emotion or a disposition. Love in the Scriptures is not something we feel – it is something we do. Love seeks the well-being of others and is expressed in genuine efforts on their behalf. This love is redefined in Christ's self-giving. We act in love regardless of how we feel. We don't have to like everybody; we just have to love them. I firmly believe that our ability to reveal this unique relationship that exists by God's grace among us is our most convincing testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

Doug Ottati, author and professor, states this clearly, "The Golden Rule tries to keep us from thinking only of ourselves. It makes use of our (admittedly partial and limited) capacity to imagine ourselves in another person's place in order to help us figure out how to treat other people with compassion, justice, and fairness. It furnishes

a standard for self-examination that helps us look to our neighbors' interest and not merely to our own. In so doing, it helps us to follow Jesus, the one who taught love of God and neighbor – the one who came not merely to pay attention to himself but to show mercy and kindness to others. And this is how it helps us to turn toward God's coming reign of righteousness and peace.”

You know, I still have friends who are “born-again,” who are evangelicals and fundamentalists. We don't agree on a number of things but we do believe in Christ the Lord and belong to the God of grace. I have lost some others who feel I have left the fundamentals of the faith and who judge me to be a heretic. I've made many new friends in the company of the committed with diverse viewpoints but we share the same passion for God's kingdom. Through it all my faith journey continues and I'm convinced with the Apostle Paul that “neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (1 Rom. 8: 38,39)

How do you talk to a “born-again” Christian? Like you share your faith experience with anyone else. You do it without apology, in love with gentleness and respect. God is the only judge of your motivation and intentions. Whatever the response may be, God will provide the blessing. In the words of an old commercial – “Try it – you may even like it.”

Amen

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