

## TALKING RELIGION WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS

Galatians 5:2-15, Matthew 23:23-24

June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Whenever people talk about the beauty and wisdom of the Bible, I wonder if they've read the book. I worry they've limited their reading to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians. Or that they've ripped long passages out of their family Bibles. Having read the Bible from cover to cover, I've found as much ugliness and ignorance as beauty and wisdom.

This evening's passage is a good example. In this passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians, we're given a glimpse of what was happening in the early church and it isn't pretty. Apparently, Paul and his followers were in a serious disagreement with others in the church. Two camps had developed. One camp felt the followers of Jesus should respect the Jewish traditions and be circumcised. Paul and his group thought being circumcised was a rejection of the gospel of Jesus. In other words, the early church was fighting and dividing over the shape of a man's penis.

Isn't that beautiful and wise?

Years ago, I would have spent this sermon trying to justify the historical and theological importance of this disagreement in the early church. I would have explained how circumcision added an additional requirement for relating to God that would have impacted the growth of the church. Gentiles were less likely to become Christian if they were required to endure this procedure. I would have supported Paul's conviction that all such requirements had been made null and void in Christ. I would have downplayed the obvious inconsistency in Paul arguing elsewhere for baptism as a necessary requirement. I would have concluded that love is the new sign of a righteous life. And I would have tried to ignore Paul's unloving suggestion that his opponents castrate themselves. Years ago, I would have tried to make this passage beautiful and wise.

Today, I'd rather let it speak for itself. In a world where most men are circumcised as a matter of hygiene and where the participation of women in the church is valued as much as men, the argument over whether Christians should or shouldn't be circumcised seems rather silly. Any theological argument that excludes half the human race is ridiculous.

Today, instead of seeing this passage as a potential source of theological insight, I think it probably reveals the darker side of Christian discourse. Too often, in the Bible, in history, and in our own experience, talking about religion, especially with other Christians, is a dangerous endeavor.

Years ago, an Alcoholics Anonymous group asked to meet in the basement of the church I was serving. Curious about the group, I asked if I could sit in on one of their meetings. It was impressive. I found people sharing and caring at a depth I seldom experienced in the church. They talked with honesty and humility about their addiction to alcohol and the troubles it created. As they talked, almost nothing was out of bounds.

I say “almost” because there were two topics they didn’t allow anyone to discuss. Indeed, they began their meeting with this disclaimer: “We are not gathered to talk about religion or politics.” After the meeting, I asked the leader why they had that rule. He said, “We’ve learned that talking about religion or politics always ends in a fight.”

I didn’t argue with him. In my experience, many people find discussions about religion or politics frightening. These two topics are laden with so much baggage that few of us can talk about them without an emotional response. When someone speaks publicly and passionately about either religion or politics, many of us are uncomfortable.

I experienced such a moment this past weekend at a picnic I attended. A group of us were sitting together when one of the men said, “God help us if Obama get’s elected.” While his sentence was masterful, mentioning both religion and politics in less than eight words, it was completely ignored. It was as if he had passed gas loudly and unapologetically. Someone coughed. Several averted their eyes. A woman quickly changed the subject. Thankfully, the man picked up our social cues. He didn’t mention religion or politics the rest of the evening.

I wonder if this aversion to talking religion and politics has become almost instinctual. For thousands of years, humans have killed each other either in the defense of religion or nation. We know how easy it is for a casual discussion about God or country to become an impassioned argument about righteousness, descend into a hateful exchange of insults, and result in a declaration of war. Brothers quit talking to sisters, parents shun their children, churches split, and nations disintegrate when people talk about religion and politics.

Ironically, even churches – religious institutions – often operate more like that AA group than we realize. Churches and preachers often limit their discussions to personal matters and avoid any discussion of religious dogma or political issues. Even here at Irvington I’ve learned to be careful. Expressing a strong religious or political position has the potential to cause anger and pain. When others make strident statements, I often cringe.

It's tempting to take the AA approach and discourage such statements and discussions. Church can become a sanctuary from such dangerous and divisive concerns, a place where everyone tries to be nice, with the goal of being one big happy family. There's only one small problem with such an approach. Religion and politics deal with the most important issues of life – our relationship to God, the universe, and each other.

How can we pretend to be a vital and intimate community if we avoid talking about the important issues of life? How can Christianity hope to have any impact on the pressing issues of our age if we're afraid to talk about religion with each other? And if we can't talk with those with whom we share certain affinities then how can we possibly dialogue with those with whom disagree? Can Christians talk to each other about religion?

I suppose that depends on what we mean by religion. If talking about religion means discussing our relationship with God, with the universe, and with each other, I think that's possible, healthy, and helpful. The problem is that Christians tend to quickly move from these existential questions to the minutia of religious ritual and dogma. We strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.

That image belongs to Jesus. He used it in criticizing the Pharisees and their rigid requirements for being a righteous person – right with God and with the world. He suggested they were so concerned about the details of religious ritual that they were missing the big picture – issues like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In other words, they were too worried about the shape of a man's penis. They didn't realize that when it comes to religion the only size that matters is the size of the human heart. When we focus on anything other than the human capacity to love and be loved, we strain out gnats and swallow camels.

Of course, gnats can be so irritating. They can drive us to distraction. Before we know it, we're swatting at them.

I think that's what happens to Paul. He obviously knows what is important. He says in 6<sup>th</sup> verse that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Paul acknowledges the destructiveness of getting distracted by the details. He says, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” And yet in the middle of these wise reminders, he threatens those who disagree with him over circumcision with divine wrath and suggests they should castrate themselves. In essence, an outline of this passage would read, “I love you. Go to hell. I love you.”

This is the problem with much Christian discourse. We can't decide whether to ride the camel or to swat at the gnats. We know we should focus on loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, but they are so irritating. We eventually find

ourselves saying ugly things about those with whom we disagree. Even Jesus struggled with this dynamic. In the passage we heard this morning, he chastised the Pharisees for not focusing on mercy and then called them a brood of vipers. He couldn't practice what he preached.

I understand that struggle. Phil and I wrote two books about God's love and grace. Many in Western Yearly Meeting responded to those books by buzzing around our faces. We tried to ignore them, but it's so difficult. Eventually, we started swatting at them. We started saying ugly things about our critics. We couldn't practice what we preached.

In the midst of our failures, it is easy to give in. Repeatedly, Christians have surrendered to anger and hate, fought and divided, and made it difficult for the rest of the world to see any difference between Christian behavior and non-Christian behavior. We've become the hypocrites that Jesus chastised. But, though we have given in time and time again, we can not give up.

**The only message that makes Christianity worth sustaining is its emphasis on love.** Paul and Jesus got it right, even if they couldn't always do it right. Paul said, "The entire law is summed up in a single command, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" None of the other minutia really matters. Jesus said, "A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35.)

I ought to know that. I've sung that song all my life.

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. They will know we  
are Christians by our love.*

As difficult at that is, it couldn't be clearer. They'll know we are Christians by our love. If our discussion with other Christians isn't characterized by love then it isn't Christian discussion. If we spend our time straining out gnats, we're hypocrites rather than Christians. Of course, this is easy to see in others and difficult to see on ourselves.

We all want to justify swatting at the gnats. We want to pretend that what divides us from other Christians is vital and important. The followers of Paul and his opponents in Galatia were arguing about who was Christian. Paul thought anyone who was circumcised was no longer a Christian. His opponents thought anyone who wasn't circumcised wasn't a Christian. Across Galatia, Christians were singing,

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored  
And they'll know we are Christians by shape of our penises. They will know we  
are Christians by shape of our penises.*

Isn't quite as catchy, is it?

But, before we laugh at the absurdity of Paul and the Galatians, we should probably think about the tunes we sing...

*They'll know we are Christians by our belief in the virgin birth isn't much better. They'll know we are Christians by how closely we abide by Western Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice doesn't move me. They'll know we are Christians by whether we protest against the war, though more melodious to me, is still as silly. Try it yourself. Think about whatever issue is dividing you from other Christians and see if you can sing it without embarrassment.*

Most of what divides Christians comes from straining out gnats. The reason we have such a difficult time talking about religion with other Christians is because we still aren't fully committed to a theology of love. Let me quote from one of my favorite authors:

*A theology of love is grounded in the realization that God loves our enemies as much as God loves us. And we are all created in the image of this God. We are all precious in God's sight. We are all children of God. This, more than any other idea, changes how we perceive others. It requires us to call every man and every woman by the names that make murder nearly impossible – brother and sister. This is the irony of Jesus' command to love our enemy. Once we perceive our enemies as our brothers and sisters, they cannot remain our enemies. Once we see our kinship to all, we no longer see them as competitors for God's favor, but as fellow heirs of an expansive grace.*

I wrote those words in 2003. And, like Paul and Jesus, I don't always practice what I preach.

That doesn't matter because those words are still true. These are the ideas I need to talk about with both Christians and non-Christians. I need to focus on these ideas – the camel – and quit swatting at the gnats. Learning to ride that camel will be challenge enough.