

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
Sunday Following the Epiphany
January 9, 2011

“The Gospel, Arizona, and More...”
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Sermon Notes

It's interesting to note that Jesus was a grown man by the time he was baptized. Which makes sense, in that if God were to say something like, “This is my son in whom I am well pleased” it would have to take place after the one being baptized had had some time to do something to be pleased with.

For the author of Matthew, this affirmation, which in Matthew's Gospel is only heard by Jesus, would be a confirmation of Isaiah's prophecy:

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

For the evangelist and those who edited it over the years, before its final form was settled, it is also important to remember that they are telling a story. A story that spans millennia, from creation to the present, and as we seek a unified field theory in physics – a theory that shows how all physical things fit together; in their own way, people were living into a unified God theology, once in which all the teachings and experiences of the past were on the brink of being fulfilled in “one” who would do such things, as God – through the prophets and ancient narratives had promised.

No where, in any other the phrases directly related to Jesus, is there one in which he says this is what he heard. Still, if we imagine the day when Jesus came walking down the banks of the Jordan River, up to John, and was baptized – it's easy to see Jesus standing there in this moment of public ordination. It's easy to see him emitting in some way, in some sense, just how important and promising he was to be. And, as the evangelists wrote their narratives in the years to come, they would take license and amplify certain situations to dramatically convey to people the gospels that we honor today.

For us, many years later, this form of narrative history is problematic, primarily because our perception is that we **now** “do” history the right way. Facts, first hand accounts, verifying leads and sources – and yet we don't get it right for several reasons:

(1) Bias and point of view

- (2) The limitations of observation – including our ability to exhaust all possibilities
- (3) The unavailability of information, for any reason – generally held back or spun to promote a certain legacy

Think about any conspiracy theory. The assassination of JFK, for example. How accurate is the history of that event in its fullness? On November 21, 2013 – it will be fifty years since the assassination! And still, despite the commissions and reports – many people are still unconvinced that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

So, viewing the Gospels as history, in my opinion is a mistake. Viewing them as accurate representations of every event they describe, is a mistake. Using them to judge others – is an egregious misuse of their intent. It is what I would call sin.

To see the gospels as a spiritual guide based on the lives of people who lived long ago, following and relaying the path and the message of the exceptional God-expression in Jesus of Nazareth is what holds me close, holds me close in an embrace that I can trust, without suspicion, cynicism, or the need to verify.

It allows the God-expression that is within me to connect to God without needing any specific formula to do so. It is a description of the Trinity for me, in God and God's expression in Jesus connecting through the Spirit and expression of God in us all.

After **all**, how could the Trinity not include us?

And, these gospels and their message will always be a grass-roots movement, with the Spirit moving through people, who move toward others, passing on the message of promise and hope and love.

It's what we do here.

And it seems, for whatever reason, this is the way it will be. God has chosen not to arrive and with a wave of whatever God's hand might look like, change the people of the world, and their universal treatment of one another. God has left it up to us – and left us all we need to do so.

However, we sometimes don't get it right.

But before I go any further, a disclaimer: I don't believe that the pulpit in a congregation is a place for political debate. Policy issues, yes; politics, no. It is one thing to mobilize people for or against a policy and quite another to galvanize folk behind a particular politician or party. Not every cleric sees it that way.

So, this is about policy and practices that have led us to another horrendous and violent tragedy in Tucson, Arizona. A horror, yesterday, in which an individual on

the fringe with anti-government tendencies, and in his early twenties, entered a supermarket center, where Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was meeting with her constituents. The individual approached the congresswoman and fired, continuing to spray bullets into the crowd. Six people died, 13 are injured, with the Congresswoman, herself, in critical condition. He is in custody and a potential accomplice is being sought.

Last year, following Congressman Giffords vote in favor of health care reform legislation, her office in Tucson was vandalized. The 40 year-old-congresswoman, had this to say at that time:

“This is a situation where people really need to realize that the rhetoric of firing people up really has consequences.”

Our prayers are with all those caught up in this terrible tragedy. My prayers are also that the practice of politicians and media in promoting or discounting policy decisions through lies, derision, misinformation, bigotry and deception cease. Just stop.

Just as our actions of following the teachings of the Gospel in the Spirit in which they were intended somehow brought us and others here,

the deception that had become part of the policy making process in this country is producing the opposite results that anyone – from any party or any agency – could ever – should ever condone.

For a very long time, I have charged this and other denominations with being complicit in the violence toward the LGBT/Q community because of the practices of exclusion and bias in refusing full participation to gay people. The policies of a church that prevent people from being members feed a segment of the population with an endorsement for their hatred and an added impetus for a Second Amendment remedy or worse.

When Matthew Shepherd was murdered in October 1998, I was sure, hopeful that people would wake up about the violence foisted on people who were marginalized, in general, and gay people in particular. It's taken a long time and there's still more to go. Some changes? Yes.

You are sitting in a church this morning, one of the few in the country, who would call an openly gay person to serve as its minister. So, the fact that I serve here in the temporary position of Stated Supply Pastor as a gay man is something that would not happen in the great majority of the 11,000 Presbyterian churches in this country, simply because I am gay.

Still, I hope that the tragedy in Arizona stays in the media long enough for us to change. It will take a while. That's no reason to give up, in fact, it's the opposite.

This compartmentalization of people, marketing of lies and fear, elevated hyperbole toward outcomes of particular decisions – in religions and governments, alike, has to stop.

Just as we, this morning, are not well pleased with the viral hatred that has shown its ugly self once again in Tucson, let us not lose heart. Instead, let us call this church, our temples, our places of worship, our government, and all others to a higher standard of justice and equality for all.

Surely, both God and we will be well-pleased in however we can help that to happen.

May the slightly modified words of Isaiah be words that can be attributed to us, as well:

“Here are my servants, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon them; they will bring forth justice...”

Amen