

Living Out of Fear

Part 2 of 4 in the series, *When Christians Get It Wrong*
1 Peter 3:8-15 – September 19, 2010 – Browns Point UMC
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This is the second in our four Sundays in the series, *When Christians Get It Wrong*. Last week we started into this topic with the understanding that we are not perfect, and sometimes our actions and behaviors actually turn people away from the faith – we being Christians everywhere, United Methodists, and even the congregation here at Browns Point. We talked about the word, “hypocrite,” and the Greek version, which means, “an actor in a play,” and we prayed that we might practice what we preach and be more aware of how we’re living in the world so we’re not just playing the part of Christians but actually living as Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

For the next two Sundays we’re going to explore a couple of specific ways we Christians get it wrong – and the logical reasons we give for behavior that we might *think* is actually Christian. Today we’re going to talk about what happens when we live out of fear – and next week, when we put rules before people. But the result of both of these things is behavior that is *unChristian*, behavior that turns people away from the life of faith instead of inviting them in.

Now there are at least a dozen places we could go this morning in terms of living out of fear – treating people in unChristian ways because we are afraid – of them, of ourselves, of our doubts. We’re afraid of what we don’t know, we’re afraid of being proved wrong, we’re afraid maybe God isn’t as big as we had hoped... and we live out of that fear instead of living out of the promises of the gospel. And I’d like to draw on recent events in the news and focus today on how we treat people who are not Christians. In surveys of people who have rejected the church – not people who have fallen out of the habit of going to church, but people who have weighed the pros and cons of Christianity and have *decided* not to associate themselves with Christians – we hear repeatedly that Christians are arrogant, judgmental, and exclusive. “If you’re not a Christian, you’re wrong,” they say. Or, put more eloquently, “Sometimes Christians are a little too free in determining who God loves and rewards, and who God is sending to hell.”

Boiled down, it’s a question of how wide God’s mercy is. We say, “If you don’t believe the basics that I believe...”, or “if you don’t believe the details I believe...”, or “if you don’t believe the nuances I believe...”, “you will spend eternity being tormented.” Or if we don’t believe in hell, then we still judge you as if God had condemned you. And the line is in a different place with just about everyone: some Christians believe that only their very specific sect of Christianity will go to heaven. When I googled “what percentage of Christians are going to hell” (because all good pastors use Google, right?), I got a whole range of well-written essays claiming generally that 51-99% of the world’s population was damned.

But it’s an even bigger issue when we’re talking about people of other religions: faithful people of other faith traditions, who must believe just as strongly as we do that their way is the right way, or they wouldn’t be following it. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to them or to those with no faith that we Christians say our God is loving, kind, merciful, and just, but if you don’t say the right words and pray the right prayer, you will not benefit from that love, kindness, and justice, no matter when or where you were born, who has influenced you in your life, what sort of culture you are a part of, or what kind of “Christians” you have (or have not) encountered.

How wide is God's mercy? And how do we treat other people who may be different than us?

Now there are three major beliefs in terms of who's going to heaven and who's going to hell. First, perhaps the most widely voiced view, if not the most widely held, is Christian Exclusivism. This belief is basically that all humans are born into sin and the kingdom of God is a perfect place that cannot allow sinfulness, so God sent Jesus to die on the cross, giving us the righteousness needed to get into the kingdom. But each person must accept this righteousness for her or himself to enter heaven. Now some modern evangelicals modify the Christian exclusivist view to say that if you are a child, have limited mental ability, live in a place where Christian missionaries have never been, or lived before Jesus lived, God will judge you on the access to the light of God you had instead of tightly on the verbal acceptance of the righteousness of Christ. But this is the view we likely hear most about. Second is Christian Universalism – not to be confused with Unitarian Universalism. This is also called “Ultimate Reconciliation.” This view argues that hell exists but only for reform, as eventually all people will acknowledge God and be reconciled, entering the eternal kingdom. And the third view, held by some famous and very influential Christians like John Wesley, is called Christian Inclusivism. This view says that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and we're only saved by Jesus' death and resurrection, but that salvation is a gift that may be offered to anyone God chooses, that none of us deserves, and salvation is 100% a gift bestowed by God.

I struggle at least a bit with all of these, but the last is probably closest to what I believe myself, which was best articulated by my systematic theology professor, Geoffrey Wainwright, who said, “We have no idea how far God will go or how persistent God will be in retrieving all people into the kingdom.” I like to leave a lot of it up to mystery, because frankly I don't think judgment is mine to make. **Nor do I think our life on this earth should be governed by what we think is going to happen after we die. I think our life on this earth should be governed by who we follow.** And if you strive to follow Jesus, like I do, then you must be, as 1 Peter says, respectful and kind and generous and compassionate. This doesn't mean always agreeing with people or letting people run over you or not telling the truth when it's a tough thing to hear – but it does mean doing it all with gentleness and love.

I have heard so many stories of Christians telling others that they are going to hell. Now I have been told a few times that I *should* go to hell, but only once has someone told me that they believed I was headed there. I have to say that didn't make me want to hang out with them very long. And if I wasn't convinced that *they* had the wrong idea about who God is, I might have stepped away from the people who call themselves Christians altogether. In my case, my Christian experience just looked different than another person's experience, and that person was so afraid, I think, that if there could be more than one way, her way might be wrong. And I believe that a lot of our judgment of others – of other faiths and other denominations and other cultures – is a product of our fear. We don't want to offer too much to others because we might lose ourselves. We don't want to learn about other faiths because it might make us doubt the religion we've already invested so much in. We are afraid of what we don't know, and we let that fear turn into judgment and unkindness and disrespect, though at least as often as Jesus told us to love each other, he told us not to be afraid.

And to be honest, when I have gone to Jewish friends' homes for a Seder meal, or knelt beside the faithful in a Muslim temple, I can't help but say, “I know you, and I've seen how you live, and I don't think our gods are the same with different names like some will try to tell you and

I know our religions really are different and I am not afraid to say I don't understand how it will all work out but I think we will be together in what I have learned to call the kingdom and I respect the way you live and am so grateful that my life is made richer by knowing you."

Because I believe what we sang together this morning: that there is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. And the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind.

Then what does this mean for evangelism? What does it matter? Why not just live and let live? Here's what I think: we practice evangelism, we tell the Good News, not because we believe God is going to stomp everyone to hell if we don't. We do it because we believe that Jesus *is* the one to follow; and that following him is the life that really is life. We do it because Jesus asked us to, and the grace that he showers on our lives every single day is so overwhelming there is no other response we could possibly give. We tell people about Jesus, because in knowing him, we are able to see a glimpse of the beauty of eternity here on earth. We are always ready to give a witness, as the passage we heard from 1 Peter instructs us, but we do it with gentleness and respect. Because we have been shown a kindness we did not deserve and a love we have never been worthy of, we *love others* – because the one who loves us asked us to love them, too, even if we don't understand, even if we aren't sure.

In the days leading up to September 11th this year, my generally-more-progressive-and-theologically-educated-mostly-clergy friends spent a lot of time and energy on their twitter, facebook, and blog pages discussing Pastor Terry Jones and his plans to burn the Quran. They universally condemned or at least disapproved Jones' plan and many tried to articulate that they were *different* Christians than who Jones' Dove World Outreach Center claimed to be. Behind all their comments was the same question: "How do I claim the same name these people so loudly claim and convince the world that I am different – that my Jesus is not their Jesus? That I am not afraid of you and I strive to live a life of humility and compassion?"

One of the problems that faces us is that while there are many, many Christians getting it right, they're not often very vocal about it. And there are many, many, loud, newsworthy Christians who are getting it wrong. That's why we have to tell others about Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life; who is love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy; who knit you together in your mother's womb and breathes the breath of life into your nostrils each morning. It's not about deciding who's going where or who's right and who's wrong. It's about loving people the way we have been loved. There is good news to be heard – and people all over the world are surely waiting, yearning, straining to hear it over the din of hatred and fear that rings loud. Let us be the ones, my friends. Let us be the ones who tell them about Jesus. Let us be the ones to tell them that we are a people of love.