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IN THE NAME OF GOD

Fountain Street Church – June 23, 2002

Arend D. Lubbers

Fifty years ago this summer I had my road to Damascus experience except it was on the road to Sarajevo when as a twenty-year old I gave up guilt. I tell you about it because even this life-assisting revelation hasn’t secured me from occasional lapses. One of those lapses brings me to the pulpit this morning. I usually summon the courage to decline invitations to preach sermons. But after a few years of saying no to those authorized to fill out the summer preaching slate at Fountain Street I feel guilty at not meeting a responsibility that the invitation implies I accept, and I accept. Not long after the event when I relieved myself of guilt’s burden I was urged by several friends with whom I had considerable personal and religious compatibility at the time to become a preacher. This higher calling never quite captured me because as I waited for it to awaken my desire and consuming interest, an inner voice louder and more persistent said,” What can you possibly say to people each week that will meet their expectations?” I was brought up in a period when two sermons a week were expected, one in the morning and one at night. In our town founded by Dutch immigrants even a third Sunday sermon in Dutch was required by bi-lingual clergymen.
All this I say to you because I made my decision and here I am not sticking to it. Your attendance here helps me assuage my guilt, but it does not make me a preacher. Yet, I must say something. The September 11\textsuperscript{th} destruction in New York City was perpetrated by Islamic Fundamentalists who take issue with our way of life and acted in the name of Allah, in the name of God. Terror justified by religion has been on my mind so that is what I am going to talk about this morning.

In the 12\textsuperscript{th} century a monk at the Abby of St. Albans in England wrote detailed accounts of how Turks murdered Christians and even in cannibalistic terms described how they devoured the tenderest parts. Whether fact or more likely fiction, it didn’t matter. The stage was set for crusaders when Christians in God’s name would march and sail to the east to route the infidel from Christianity’s holy places. For centuries the Christian agenda was set accompanied by land grabs, church-imperial politics, and the accumulations of wealth.

In the 16\textsuperscript{th} century Henry VIII separated the church in England from the Catholic Church and took upon himself and the crown the leadership of Christ’s church in his realms. He confiscated church property, married, divorced and executed wives, beheaded his chancellor, Thomas More, who would not recognize his right to be God’s vicar of all England. All this Henry did invoking God’s name for it was politically necessary for him to do so.
While on the other side of the channel French Catholic rulers determined to wipe out heresy and later Protestantism, making the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre both a fact and symbol of their intent.

In the 17th century the Lord Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell cut a swath through catholic Ireland with his army, that through the centuries has brought Ireland to the hopeless conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the North. Cromwell was a devout man. All of this began in the name of God.

From 711 when the Saracens were defeated in France and pushed south into the Iberian Peninsula until the 16th century when the Turks were turned away from the gates of Vienna, fear of conquest by Moslems pervaded the Christian west. Now five centuries later a virulent strain of the prophet Mohammad’s religion has gained the world’s attention for in the name of Allah they are ready to kill those whom they call infidels. And leaders promise a paradise of untold pleasures to the youth they persuade to be their instruments of destruction to take out the enemy by destroying themselves.

Despite all the evidence that leads us to be disturbed about the consequences of religion most of us came to our maturity expecting positive results for our lives from our religious experiences. This leads to asking two questions. Where does religion come from and why does it so often go wrong? The origin of the words religion yields some
interesting definitions i.e.; to bind together is one, another, to be concerned, a third to pay heed to. Out of the mists of the past these suggest human beings seeking commonalities, understandings that will help them survive together, paying heed to what they see and experience, and giving meaning to it. First, in small numbers gathered together, then tribes of people drawn together by geography and genetics. Later the evolution of human thought and communication made it possible for a leader of a people to embrace a religion and bring his people along with him. By then we can see that religion, a belief system, also had political and economic ramifications for those who embraced it. From the beginning it appears that the search for religion was the search by humans to save themselves from their worst instincts and invoke a power outside themselves for their protection. The search did not bring a uniformity of belief and practice but it did have the common characteristic that all religions were perceived by their adherents as representing the truth.

In this long process of religious development from sophistication to sophistication the need to pay heed to the power of God has not waned, but defining the power of God causes differences. In the Christian religion the essence and priorities are well defined in the gospels. Listen to some of Jesus’ words, “you have learned that they were told love your neighbor, hate your enemy. But what I tell you is this love your enemies and pray for your persecutors only so you can be children of your Heavenly Father who makes the sun arise on the good and bad alike… If you love only those who love you, what reward can
you expect..... There must be no limit to your goodness as your Heavenly Father’s
goodness knows no bounds.” The thought expressed by Jesus is revolutionary,
advocating an approach to human life that was not found much, if at all before his time,
and as we have seen, not necessarily by those who proclaimed in his name afterwards.

Though I have not studied in depth world religions, the Christian faith, with the life
of Christ and the compilation of the Bible provided the human species insights and a way
to new revelation. It is truly a way to save individuals from destroying themselves. Other
religions have their way, and all seem to have common spiritualities.

If a good way is open to us why do we so often pervert it in the name of God? First
we must, I believe, look back to the origin of life. There accompanies the spark of life an
instinctive need to protect it even at the loss of other lives. Certainly it is the way with
animals and in the end it fails. No individual physical life lasts indefinitely. Add human
consciousness to that need and there is an opening to an array of possibilities. The most
prominent is the native aggression used to protect and sustain life in the unconscious
manifesting itself consciously in human behavior. Life innately lives for itself, it is egotistic.
Seeking and gaining power over others in ruthless ways is one of its expressions. The
accumulation of unjustly gained possession is another. The failure of individuals or groups
to deal thoughtfully and fairly with others is a sure sign. Our forbearers, in the midst of
pre-history groping for ways to define and cope with this characteristic, began to formulate
religions for that purpose. Unfortunately what they and what we today understand from experience and grace as a civilizing control of aggression’s destructive tendencies is not universally held. The militant Islamist is much on our minds for in the name of God he unleashes ungodly aggression.

Second comes from discomfort with the unknown. Religion since it is the avenue to truth must find all if it, definitely and definitively, and set aside the uneasiness of not knowing. There is a wide spectrum from the absolutist to the relativist. On the absolutist end we will find those, not all, who can kill, condemn, and cast out in the name of God.

When I think of the young Americans who chose to study in schools of militant Islam I see young men who are relieved of the burden of further searching and uncertainty. I see young men given opportunity to vent their aggression using the will of God in a way far removed from my understanding of God’s will. I believe they have traded their revulsion of that which is degrading in our society for an evil alternative with the society they have embraced.

The theological structures with their certainties provide explanation for the greatest fear of what is not known to us. And the need for surety about afterlife may contribute to building theological systems of thought and behavior that carry with them exclusive and absolute tenets about all things. Those absolutes carry with them the danger of protracted battles both hot and verbal fought for generations until descendants who may not be held
by true religious fervor are carrying on the fight by acculturation. Yet in the name of God a total absolutist about religion assumes God’s power. God then is made in man’s image.

Ungodly aggression and unqualified absolutism, always it seems infiltrate religions and sometimes make them function in the interests that they were born to combat. So if religion is “on the label” it does not guarantee what it purports to deliver. What then should we look for to find genuine religion? We should realize that religion, to have its desired effect in the life of the individual, is comprised of concepts to be experienced not facts to believe. “The greatest of these is love” writes Paul to the Corinthians. Our Christian heritage and probably that of all great religions, is rooted in the message of unconditional love. God is defined as love. Jesus is seen as God’s gift of redeeming love, and love is a concept we can understand. We feel love for others, we feel it coming to us, we experience different aspects and intensities of it. We know our lives work better when it is present with us and around us. When we observe those who are deprived of it we know their lives are less complete than ours. We can get our minds and feelings around the concept of love. So as difficult as it is to practice we know what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your enemies.”

Humility is the best check on the excesses brought about by aggression and absolutism. It’s a check on the ego. For that reason, after love, it is my favorite concept. Humility enables holding beliefs, seeking and having insights without insisting that yours is
the “last word”. It sets aside arrogance and self-righteousness. Humility does not prevent you from defending yourself or your faith if threatened from without, but it keeps you from threatening others in the name of God.

Reverence is the capacity for deep respect, respect for living creatures, for the wonders of nature, for the power of the spirit in our lives, for good deeds that transform life from an anxiety filled experience into one of caring and loving. Reverence begets gratitude, one of the best of all feelings because reverence is also a way of perceiving life. If reverence is part of your make-up you are grateful for the beauty you see all around you. The other side of the reverence coin is the concern and even anger you feel when reverence for life is violated. Those who attack and kill in the name of religion may be devout, but they are not reverent.

Grace is a concept that helps us live in peace with ourselves, to accept what we don’t know without giving up our striving to know more. In the greater scheme we fit, and we are all right. Grace is a word for the relationship of the spirit of God within us to the spirit of God beyond us. “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound to save a wretch like me”. We all sing it, those 19th century words, in one of America’s favorite melodies. Most of us have had wretched experiences. Most of us have regretted actions, thoughts and feelings. They are not burdens to carry forever. There is a spirituality that envelops us and connects with the spirit within when we allow it to happen. Feeling grace is more complex,
I believe, than feeling love, but it can be felt. Love must be understood before grace abounds. When you understand grace you understand your place, and the spirit within and without pretty well guide the flow of life given to you. A person in a state of grace, I don’t think, can practice religion as a reaction to the evil perceived in others, killing people because they don’t believe correctly, spewing hatred as the militant Islamists do today.

I am tempted to examine humor as a fifth religious concept, but I need more thought time on that one. If the Moslem clerics and the Irish Catholics and Protestants, the Jewish leaders and Palestinian leaders would laugh more I’m sure they would advocate killing less.

Religious belief is spiritual blood carrying spiritual nutrients throughout our beings. If it is carried by supple arteries it replenishes our spirits and also our minds, keeping them open, receptive and growing. If the arteries harden that blood cannot get through and nourish love, humility, reverence, and grace, the essential qualities of true religion. True religion then dies, yet in its name horrible events take place.