

3rd Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.4.18

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-7
John 2:13-22

“So, you’re in favor of religion?” she asked me, though her knowing I’m a pastor had me assuming this would have gone without saying. I mean, she’d just been to church. She’d seen me in action.

Religion: a word that comes to us from the root *-ligio*, as in ligature, a thing used for tying or binding.

“I’m not in favor of religion,” I said, now driving her home. “I’m not ‘in favor of it’ as in contrast to people who are ‘against’ it. I think religion is an essential aspect of the human in community.”

Religion: a word whose prefix, *re-*, implies a redoing, a doing again; a re-binding, then, of one person to others, a re-binding of a people back to their source.

“No, I’m not in favor of it. I just recognize it as intrinsic. As essential as language is to human being, as essential as sexuality, it’s an aspect of what we are, the lack of which is, frankly, unimaginable.”

Religion is the tie that binds, that makes for human groupings, which always have a mystifying aspect to them. I mean, what *does* draw certain people together, and then what keeps them together?

And these groupings can be both blessing and curse. Really, *religion* can be both blessing and curse. Even the Bible testifies as much. The times of binding therein are God-blessed. (That valley of dry bones, which comes together bone to its bone, with *ligaments* even, to take on flesh again, and to live). The times of unbinding therein are also God-blessed (That moment when God said to Abraham of Isaac not to offer him as the bound sacrifice the boy had become. That moment when Jesus said of Lazarus as if to death itself, “Unbind him, and let him go.”)

“Really,” I told her, now really getting going, “the question we need to ask about religion isn’t ‘whether’ but ‘which?’”

This is the question behind the reading from Exodus today. The Ten Commandments, the Ten Utterances or Words, the Decalogue, the Ten Best Ways: we know them by all sorts of names.

It's worth also knowing them for their brevity, for their lightness. A whole religion that has this as its foundational constitution: ten brief words. A whole religion that can be packed up into a box, the Ark of the Covenant, to be carried around and used as a touchstone for the people who were gathered by them as they wandered in the wilderness, an enormous refugee camp on its wending way from Egypt to Palestine, from servitude of Pharaoh to servitude of the Lord.

And all they do is make it so the people might live together in relative harmony. All they do is remove what common causes there tend to be for conflict in community. Who's in charge, and why? (The Lord, because the Lord loves you and freed you from slavish non-being.) How shall we conduct ourselves in families and as members of a generation? (Honorably, and with an appreciative eye toward the past for the sake of the future.) How shall we understand work? (As a thing essential to life, and something everyone's to do; essential also to a healthy community; but also a thing that can lead to exploitation, so rest, everyone, even the land.) How shall we conduct ourselves in relationship? (In a spirit of self-restraint, not committing violent harm to others, not violating sexual covenants and norms, not stealing or lying, refraining even from going after what other people have.)

It's a stunningly light touch for binding people together—which is why it's always struck me as funny, that huge statue of the Ten Commandments that first landed Roy Moore on the national stage.

You likely know Roy Moore because of his failed run for the Senate seat left vacant when Jeff Sessions became our Attorney General. But before Mr. Moore was known for that (and for his weird behavior among teens at shopping malls), he was known for being unseated from the Alabama Supreme Court for the five-ton statue of the legendary stone tablets on which were said to be written the original Ten Commandments, a statue he had made and erected on public land, which he then refused to allow removed even when it was court-ordered.

I suppose the sheer tonnage of the likeness was supposed to indicate Mr. Moore's piety. But I take that sheer tonnage to be a fundamental misunderstanding of what those Ten Commandments might actually have felt like as a gathering force for building community amidst which people and creation might thrive. God, it seems at least in considering the Decalogue, likes his religion light. So what's with the crane that Mr. Moore needs to move his statue? Apparently, it even buckles under the weight.

Talk about missing the point.

He's not alone, though. So many who embark on the question of religion miss, if not that point, then at least the point that religion is itself a thing of which God might most of all appreciate critical discussion. So we were having it, right there in the car, on our way home from church.

"What do we even mean when we say 'religion'?" I asked her. That was the most infuriating thing about the podcast I'd been talking about, the one I'd mentioned in the worship service from which we were heading home—this conversation between Karen Armstrong and journalist Tom Sutcliffe. An interview, really, Ms. Armstrong was representing as a religion scholar whose personal history includes time as a nun in a convent and who now focuses on comparative religion. She was trying to lay out to Mr. Sutcliffe, whose work at *The Guardian* is well known, the case for why asking whether religion is a main cause for violence throughout history is an absurd question.

It's a common enough assertion about religion—that religion is a main cause for violence and war. Maybe you've heard this criticism. Maybe you yourself have made it. The thing of it is, though, that those framing the question that way and then having that argument never seem to get around to defining what is meant by "religion"—religion, that thing that binds us together and binds us back to our source, a spiritual matter for its not being concrete and easily pinned down, a spiritual matter for its feeling revealed and received as much as intentional or decided upon and then constructed.

Really, it was shocking to me, in the case of this podcast, that two such high-minded people could have an hour-long conversation about a thing they thoroughly differed on, and largely because they never got around to this most fundamental first step, agreeing at least upon the thing that they were debating. What is meant by "religion"?

So Mr. Sutcliffe was stuck in his secular modern mindset that religion is a discrete thing that can be separated out from other aspects of human being, and Ms. Armstrong was stuck trying to explain to him that, throughout most of human history and even now in much of the world, people would have no capacity to imagine religion as a thing separable from their experience of being a person among a people amidst the world—for it's by religion that they are at all a person among a people amidst the world. Therefore asking the world's people, as Mr. Sutcliffe and his

brethren of post-colonial Western thinkers seem intent on doing, to eschew religion for its causing such terrible violence among people is to ask them to do an impossible, even absurd, thing.

This—though it can be said that religion fuels violence, but only insofar as religion is the means by which people are bound together and bound back to their source, which might very well result in the by-product of outsiders, scapegoats even, those who might then become radicalized combatants in a blown-back war. But the secular state has created as many scapegoats-turned-radical militants as any religion ever has, which begs the question, is secular modernism itself a religion?

This is the confusion behind Jesus' action in the Temple, which John remembered in his gospel for our hearing today. It's an event, though, remembered in all four gospel narratives—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the persistence of its presence implying how crucial it is to the larger story here. The Temple would have been a focal point for Jesus; we'd be mistaken to think otherwise. We'd be dismissing Jesus' devotion to his so-called religion, Judaism, if we thought otherwise, though he, of course, would never have thought in terms of "having a religion."

And yet, the Temple: it was a place of power and beauty, a place of God's presence and faithful promise; it was also a place of religion. Here the people might be sure to encounter their Lord and to renew the ties that bound them together as a people. Here they all spoke the same language, and lived by the same law, and adjudicated the same vision of justice, and studied the same library of books which held their wisdom, history, poetry, and legend. Here also, of course, they exacted the same rites and rituals, which had been with them since their time of anticipation of being in their Promise Land.

These rites, though: these had, apparently, become counteractive. These had become, perhaps, so expensive and complicated that they were no longer practically available to all whom were right to want them. Doves cost money. Lambs cost more money. So what of the poor, who love God but can't buy a dove only to offer it up, can't even afford the journey to Jerusalem in the first place? The apparent fact that the Temple had become as a marketplace made it so many had no access to what was happening there, right as it might have been in original intent. But the poor have bodies. The poor have prayers. So what if we were to conceive of the Temple we really need as abiding within them, within all, just as Jesus implied it dwelt in him?

It'd be nice to think this is a story about Jesus' rejection of religion, and many smart people on the Protestant left have taken it so. But Jesus didn't call the Temple into question. He simply relocated it. He didn't imply that people are wrong to need a Temple in the first place, pathetic, even, if you ask people these days. Instead, he gave us a Temple more akin to those Ten Commandments, something we can carry with us though with reverence on our way.

As for those people on the Protestant left, or the post-Protestant left as it were: the notion that religion is a discrete thing that one could embrace or (would more rightly) eschew is a central tenet of secular modernism, which I do happen to think is as much a religion as the ancient, scripture-based, god-seeking wisdom traditions are, though one unconsciously-practiced and so pernicious and coy.

Consider, it has notional assertions about the mysteries of existence (though the assertions are largely that there are no mysteries). It has authoritative scriptures (by Locke, Hume, Kant, and our own Founding Fathers). It has organizational modes (namely, the liberal modern state, which has [among other things] separated out religion as a discrete and optional thing, except insofar as the tenants of secular modernism are concerned, for these are true and abiding, encompassing all humanity in its truth of human rights, legislative functioning, and market forces). Most of all, it creates a people, insiders and outsiders—those who make the grade and those who are held often in withering scorn. Plus, it comes to us from religious reform, the Protestant Reformation, which birthed forth the modern era and bequeathed to the world notions of individuality and privacy, both of which are foundational to the modern secular state insofar as they allow for “religion” to be an individual choice about how one will spend one's private time and private thoughts.

“So am I in favor of religion? Not hardly! It's just that I can't get away from it. None of us can.” But we can't get our arms **around it, can't** even hold it in plain view. Really, there's a self-denying aspect about this thing that mystifies both in form and in function—to mystify being itself a word related to myth. Thus, religion wields social power to the degree that it remains outside our peripheral vision and beyond our critical understanding. And it's for this dodgy-ness that even the most high-minded debaters, people most skilled in the art of critical thinking and argument, might forget the fundamental task, that of defining the terms for debate.

I mean, consider what lengths William Cavanaugh had to go to. A professor of Catholic Studies, William Cavanaugh wrote an article a decade ago that I think I'll never forget. Inspired by

the sudden spate of books about religion and violence, Cavanaugh took on this common take, which was likely spurred by 9/11 and the surge in post-colonial consciousness of terrorism conducted in the name of Islam. These books, these many books about religion and violence, seem largely to have been generated from one of two camps, either secular chauvinism of the sort that casts all religious practice in service of a transcendent God as silly, or American Christian nationalism that envisioned itself as the true religion standing in opposition to the falseness that is Islam. In short, these books either hated Islam or hated all religion. These books also, however, never got around to defining religion, at least not in any way that is helpful.

One writer, Mr. Cavanaugh noticed, did make an attempt. Author of a book entitled *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*, Richard E. Wentz claimed “religiousness is an inescapable universal human characteristic displayed even by those who reject what is called ‘organized religion,’” A fairly facile definition, it had Wentz then conclude, “Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of religion,” which had Cavanaugh wondering, why not simply call the book *Why People Do Bad Things?*

Looking for actual content, now, Cavanaugh went to the place where religion by name is most critically engaged, that is, religious studies departments at colleges and universities. He collected their course catalogues and curricula to see what was being gathered under the banner, “Religion.” What he found was surprisingly broad, including as it did “...totems, witchcraft, the rights of man, Marxism, liberalism, Japanese tea ceremonies, nationalism, sports, [and] free market ideology.”

See? It gets complicated fast. It goes from ten utterances to a year’s full of rites and rituals in a matter of moments. So I’ve decided on my own understanding of the term, which I’ll say once again because I think it’s important and I think it’s true. Religion is the mysterious action by which people are bound together in social groups and bound back to their source. It mystifies, and in this dwells much of its power, though we can probe that mystification for clarity and understanding. It’s transcendent in that it seems not to come from any one of us but from some higher mind. And it’s imminent in that its affect is real and felt.

And now, at long last, we can begin the critical work of asking the question of religion, not “whether,” but “which”—critical in that it’s both important and evaluative. Because there’s some bad religion out there. There’s some, I dare say, false religion. The way in which in American

Christianity has chosen nationalism over hospitality, has chosen prosperity over solidarity with the poor, has chosen militarism over diplomacy, has come to worship a God of self-defense over and against a God of self-giving love: I would love a sophisticated public reckoning and correction. And this is to say nothing of what bad practice is going on religions not my own. I know it's happening, I just don't have the insight to call it out. But I don't mean to do this critical work alone. Really, some of the best minds of human history have set their powers to thinking through the terrible problem of how we shall be together, of discerning God's mysterious will for the wellbeing of the whole creation, and I wish that those best minds might not abandon the project now.

Tom Sutcliffe, if you're reading this, we might even need *you*. But you've got some catch-up work to do.

We were coming to the end of now animated ride home.

Alone in the car, then, I had my usual time to reflect.

What we do here, what *we* do in this long-standing sanctuary with our still longer-established rituals: this is a social good. It is holding in our consciousness what can become reckless, arrogant, dangerous, were we to become unconscious of it. It is a playing out of our responsibility to ourselves and one another that we keep our intentions good, our motivations in service of a story grander than just our own, our confessions true, and our compulsions in refrain—especially our religiously-driven compulsions.

This is powerful stuff we're playing at here.

We're trying to imagine the mind of God and to live out that imagining in all its magnanimity and grace. We're trying to build a community that has a central point of reference but only light outer walls that these ties that bind might also give. We're trying to define and also embrace. We're trying to discipline ourselves and one another in a discipleship of self-giving love which is paradoxically both bound and boundless.

Yes, this is powerful stuff, and we're right to engage it with consciousness, conscientiousness, and care—because we might get it wrong.

We might mistake God for money, and find ourselves worshipping that instead. We might mistake God for military might, and find ourselves setting our hope on that. We might mistake God for ourselves and our own cleverness; we might then imagine God hating or resenting or peevishly tolerating everyone whom we hate or resent or peevishly tolerate. We might mistake God

as violent and condemning as we are violent and condemning, which asks nothing of us but more of the same. We might mistake “us” as the biggest “us” God seeks to embrace. It could happen. God knows this has, and all by the generative power of religion.

We gather, then, to subject ourselves to the God whose understanding of religion is critical as well, and to subject ourselves to one another in aim of being true to the community whose mission is to bear forth the terribly light burden of sacrificial love.

Thanks be to God.