

“Are My Shirts Ironed Yet?”

Sunday, February 4, 2007

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
www.fountainstreet.org

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“ARE MY SHIRTS IRONED YET?”

The Worst Sermon Ever

I am going to share a reading with you now, but let me lead up to it. Four of us get together every week to plan the worship service. In our conversation this week we asked why we have readings at all. In scriptural traditions, religions with sacred texts, reading them is vital. It is part of acknowledging their authority and power.

Our faith does not revere a certain text. Ulrich Zwingli, the early Swiss Protestant, once said, “Whatever is true is God’s word, no matter who said it.” We agree. Truth is the only thing we worship. And that’s why we read, because truth is larger than we realize – not only larger than one sacred book, but larger than any one person’s thoughts, larger than any one era, larger than any single human institution.

We also read to remind ourselves of how much we have yet to learn. This morning, our teacher is the late Fred Rogers, educator, television star, clergyman. He writes:

One summer, midway through seminary, I was on a weekend vacation in a little town in New England. I decided on Sunday to go to hear a visiting preacher in the little town’s chapel. I heard the worst sermon I could have ever imagined. I sat in the pew thinking, “He’s going against every rule they’re teaching us about preaching. What a waste of time!” That was what I thought until the very end of the sermon when I happened to see the person beside me with tears in her eyes, whispering, “He said exactly what I needed to hear.” It was then that I knew that something very important had happened in that service. The woman beside me had come in need. Somehow the words of the poorly-crafted sermon had been translated into a message that spoke to her heart. On the other hand, I had come in judgment, and I heard nothing but the faults.

It was a long time before I realized it, but... now I know that the space between a person doing his or her best to deliver a message...and the listeners need, is holy ground. Recognizing that seems to have allowed me to forgive myself for being the accuser that day.

Have You Ironed My Shirts Yet?

A year ago I contributed a sermon to our annual auction, which begins again this week. I have, therefore, two reasons to preach that sermon now: 1. It helps promote this year’s auction, and 2. I had better complete this one before ‘selling another.’

Paul Asselin bought it, and we sat down to talk about what was on his mind. The idea of buying a sermon, you see, is to choose subject. What I said was still to be my thoughts, but about something he wanted to hear. And oh, yes, he also bought my offer to iron his shirts. I haven’t done that either, and no I will not do that at the

same time. I tried that, as some of you may recall, on Mother's Day. I found out I am terrible at multi-tasking. I leave it to you to decide if my shirts or my sermon were the worse for it. By the way, here are the shirts.

In the end, Paul steered me (as others had) toward Sam Harris's intense book, *The End of Faith*, and asked me to comment on his themes. That meant I had to read it, which I did, having received no less than two copies from other members. Obviously, it struck a chord around here, and it's not hard to understand.

Harris's thesis is that faith, the religious kind, is the root of all evil. Ok, not all, but a whole lot. His first chapters are a scorched earth indictment of the irrational nature of religious belief, and our collective failure to see religion for what it is - a delusional notion which, in its organized form as religion, has been and is now especially very dangerous.

Now, I love a good rant and Harris is very good at it. In a voice as acid as it gets he as much as says religion is the emperor without clothes, indicting not only wild-eyed fundamentalism but moderates as well. Why moderates? Because moderates try to mitigate the evils of religion with respect for diversity and tolerance, forgetting that the nature of each religion is to proclaim itself superior to others. They must aggrandize and militate and compete because how can you think you are right and not think others are wrong?

I suppose Paul wants to know what I think of all this. Well, first let me say I am angry. I am angry that I am not as smart, clear, and focused as Sam Harris. I wish I could write like that and say stuff like that. Being a child of liberal parents, I embody that caricature of liberalism - one who cannot take his own side in an argument. Not a recipe for outrage.

But if I said that, then I should also say "Go home, sell this church, dismiss me and the rest of the staff" because if he is correct, then even people like us are wrong. To be religious, even in a liberal way, sustains the legitimacy of religious fervor anywhere. Fortunately, Harris himself provides me with good reason to disagree with him.

After he has laid waste to faith and religion he turns to the chief rationale for religious value, morality. If there were no religion, goes the argument, there would be no morality at all. We would simply be animals, run amok, riot, and so on. Harris spends considerable time showing how this is not necessarily so, and in so doing also takes up the problem of evil and violence and ends up, following a rigorously rational path, concluding that sometimes evil must be resisted with force. Following a line of thought he perhaps did not recognize was out of Aquinas, it is morally justifiable to use violence to prevent a reasonable expectation of violence equal or greater than what it would take to stop it.

Well, applying that same line of thought to religion, disbanding liberal and moderate churches would permit a worse form of religion to grow unchecked. But Harris is right in questioning the passive role of liberal religion, which sticks to the aforesaid principles of tolerance and diversity. As it has been elsewhere asked, should the tolerant tolerate the intolerant?

The answer is no. So there is a role for liberal, rational, empirical religion, only

he does not say that. (Having boxed himself into a corner indicting all organized religion, he cannot now use religion to meet this challenge.) Like many rants, his answer is much weaker than his accusation.

In other words, if religion is a wrinkled shirt, he sees no alternative but to throw it away. But his own argument suggests that not only can it be made better, it must. What Harris fears, and rightly, is faith without thought, believed without evidence, lived without question. This is what makes religion into the weapon it has been and still can be. What he wants, and is right to want, is a critical spirituality, one that is willing to change for the better in the light of new knowledge. Sadly, Harris doubts that there can be an organized, rational, mystical alternative. He has not been to Grand Rapids.

An Argument Between Friends

I have another reading, about another holy conversation, one that Sam Harris should have. One that I long to have. It comes from the life of the Jewish mystic and theologian, Martin Buber.

Speaking of a time when he visited an older colleague as a house guest, Buber writes,

“One morning I got up early to read proofs...I took it into the study, but here the old man already sat at his writing desk. Directly, after greeting me, he asked me what I had in my hand and when I told him he asked whether I would not read it aloud to him. I did so gladly. He listened in a friendly manner but clearly astonished, indeed with growing amazement. When I was through, he spoke hesitatingly, then, carried away by the importance of his subject, even more passionately. “How can you bring yourself to say ‘God’ time after time?...What word of human speech is so misused, so defiled, so desecrated as this? All the innocent blood that has been shed for it has robbed it of its radiance. All the injustice that it has been used to cover has effaced its features. When I hear the highest called ‘God’ it sometimes seems blasphemous.”

The kindly eyes flamed. The voice itself flamed. Then we sat silent for a while facing each other. The room lay in the flowing brightness of early morning. It seemed to me as if a power from the light entered into me. What I answered I cannot today reproduce but only indicate.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘it is the most heavy-laden of all human words. None has become so soiled, so mutilated. Just for this reason I may not abandon it. Generations have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. The races of men with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces, they have killed for it and died for it and it bears their finger marks and their blood.... If I took the purest, most sparkling concept from the inner treasure chamber of the philosophers, I could only capture thereby a product of thought. I could not capture the presence whom generations have honored and degraded with their awesome living and dying.... We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to God for authorization. But we may not give it up.... We cannot cleanse the word God and we cannot make it whole, but defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from

the ground and set it over an hour of great care."

It had become very light in the room. It was no longer dawn but day. The old man stood up, came over to me, laid his hand on my shoulder and spoke, "Let us be friends."

Not for Nothing

Emerson is reported to have said, "A person will worship something – have no doubt about that." If we could magically remove every religion, every cult, every form of organized belief, it would come back in some form and, being human, be just as imperfect. Even today, with all the attention on fundamentalism most people live by ancient beliefs we call luck and superstition, the pagan magical thinking that not only endures dogma but science. Consider how most people assume the ESP and communicating with the dead are real. Several popular shows depend on this. No one even thinks to question them though they are hotly condemned by organized religion and ridiculed by science. The urge to believe is probably innate.

Sam Harris rightly indicts us for failing to apply the same critical powers to religion that we do to science and technology (imagine a faith-based airline or a prayer-driven bus and you see what he means) but he fails to see that the urge to believe is as inevitable as language. The world is beyond our total knowledge but we have to try and figure it out, so there is an inescapable guessing with its inescapable error that will attach.

Think of faith as spiritual clothing, something we all seek and need. We need clothing, spiritual clothing as it were, something that buffers us against the immensity and power that is the universe. We cannot live without a reason for living, meaning a belief in what it all means.

We humans believe. That will never change. What can change is how we believe and what. Harris believes, to speak ironically, that there can be no religious notions that are not ultimately delusional. His answer is a diluted Buddhism that we should all practice in the solitude of our own thoughts. But again, if he is right about the demonic powers of religion, waiting for that to happen seems as preposterous as defending the nation with nothing but Amish and Quakers.

What he wants is a spirituality that can be both rational and spiritual, what I called rational mysticism some months ago. And that the only way to do that is through institutions. Just as a person needs others to learn, most often in places called schools, so we need institutions to help us pursue this lifelong path. As I have said several times, liberal religion and this church is a 'school of the soul.'

I could go on. You should read this book. But if you read only this book, or those like it, you are as narrow as any literalist. The challenge he flings down like a gauntlet is to create an honest faith, which ironically means proving him wrong. Not about the danger of dogmatic faith, which needs to be named and challenged and questioned - that is certain and easy. The challenge is to find an honest way to free our minds, grow our souls and change the world.

We stand in a wilderness of faith, with only a hope to guide us. It would be easy,

even sensible to lose faith, meaning hope, for the human cause. I will not believe in anything just to have something to believe in. But I cannot *not* live for nothing. Imperfect as it is, and as it must be, what we do here is our best hope. But we must, ironically for us now, believe in it.

Moses is said to have told the people as he was about to die, "I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendents may live." Choose faith, not faith in something beyond belief but in the idea of faith. Yes, esteem those who question it and warn us of its dangers, "but defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care."