

Faith: Battle Line or Life Line?

Sermon: May 3, 2015, Mike Hickcox

My presence here this morning wraps up the zigzag ride of sermons we've had for the last month. Each sermon has been based on the particular interests or experiences of several of us who filled in during the time when our pastor, David Edwards, has been away for a short sabbatical. We've had Rachel Wilson talking about the experience of being a covenant member of this congregation, and the special meaning of that relationship in her life. Bob Poignant spoke about the relationship of faith and the environment on the Sunday closest to Earth Day. Last week, Pat Haley gave us a report on the programs, prospects, and plans of Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. And now, I'm here, going in yet another direction.

Last month, I attended the annual convention of the Religion Communicators Council. We met in Alexandria, Virginia, just outside of Washington DC. I've been a member of the RCC for 25 years. I've served on the board of directors and have been the national president. This connection has been very important to me – it is where I have close friendships with communicators from lots of Christian communions, as well as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hare Krishna, and other faith groups. My involvement with the RCC helps to inform my understanding of faith and of interacting with the world.

It has been my intention to base this talk today on some of the things I learned at this year's meeting. It's a matter of me going off to another place and gathering some valuable experiences to bring back and share. I will share some of my experiences, also some deeper soul-searching about the nature of religion.

The title of this sermon is *Faith: Battle Line or Life Line?* That's an ambitious title, and I can't do it justice in a brief talk. (I couldn't do it justice even in a long talk.) But I can point out the nature of faith as an issue that is a worthy one to think about seriously.

Here's how my experiences in Alexandria last month brought me around to thinking about the larger issue:

This year's meeting was coordinated by the Washington DC chapter of the Religion Communicators Council. It made sense, given the resources of the DC area, to focus part of the conference on the relationship between religion and government.

Two thoughts might come to mind immediately when I mention the relationship between religion and government:

1. We have an established separation in the United States between religion and government. That separation exists for the protection of both entities.
2. In many instances, the separation doesn't really exist. This sometimes happens where people work hard to interject their own faith into government meetings or into government buildings.

Clearly, the combination of reality #1 (separation) and reality #2 (forcing faith into government) causes issues, and those issues are often evident in the news, and they get fought out in the courts. For examples, think of prayers that are said before city council meetings, and plaques of the Ten Commandments mounted on the walls of the court house.

Despite the possibility of conflict, religion and government really are cooperating in major ways, with many positive goals and results. Several of the RCC speakers this year were there to detail some of the ways the federal government and organized religion are partners in making American society better. Here is a synopsis of some of the surprising presentations:

We heard from **Joshua DuBois**, author of the book: *The President's Devotional: The Daily Readings that Inspired President Obama*. DuBois worked for Barack Obama for several years, covering the period of his presidential campaign and the beginning of his presidency. The president, it turns out, has given many talks on religion and its relationship to his own life, and to public service. DuBois says the focus, over and over again, was on America as a nation of many religions and about people guided by their various faiths.



Dr. **Stephen Prothero**, of Boston University, wrote the New York Times best seller, *Religious Literacy: What Americans Need to Know*. In his work, he has found that America is a deeply religious country, and yet most people know little about their own religion - and much less about anyone else's faith. In the U.S., political parties often promote "values" as factors having religious importance, and yet the populace has only a superficial understanding of how these values relate to their own faith and to other faiths. Internationally, Prothero found, the world is furiously religious, but again with few people knowing anything but assumptions about other faiths.



Melissa Rogers is a special assistant to the president. She serves as executive director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Her office is mindful that it cannot promote or restrict religion. Her office forms partnerships with faith-based and community groups, especially where people are struggling and there are programs that can be identified to help them. She also is charged with giving input to the administration on policy-making. Rogers says, “Religion runs through every human endeavor, so religion has the potential to be affected by almost any law or public policy.”



We heard from Dr. **Shaun Casey**, special representative for Religion and Global Affairs in the U.S. State Department. When Casey started work at the State Department in 2013, he found there was very little engagement between state department staff and the religious and faith leaders of the host country in 200 diplomatic posts around the world. The reality is that religion affects the political, social, and economic landscapes in each region and every country. Casey’s office now prepares what he calls “religious landscape documents” for each office of the U.S. State Department – offering overviews of the religious leaders in the area, how they relate to the local culture, and the connection to policies and politics in the region. He advises Secretary of State John Kerry on how religion affects foreign policy in each region being examined. Three areas of Casey’s current involvement are: climate change issues, the ISIL organization in Iraq, and developing relations with Cuba.



My friend, the Rev. **Ken Bedell**, did not speak to the group, but Ken and I had a long talk about his work. Ken is a Senior Advisor for the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Center at the U.S. Department of Education. That’s right – the Department of Education also has a center for faith-based and neighborhood partnerships. Ken has been a chemistry teacher in Africa, a Methodist pastor in Maryland, and for years, he edited the *Handbook of U.S. and Canadian Churches* for the National Council of Churches. But now, he works for the U.S. government, coordinating President Obama’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. He works with about 250 college campuses across the country to promote interfaith and community service work. Some of the campuses have actually developed strong programs that are very intentionally interfaith.

We had a media panel where **Wajahat Ali**, a reporter at Al Jazeera, was supposed to occupy one of the chairs on the stage, but he got called away for a major story. He sent in his list of *Top 30 Do's and Don'ts when Covering Islam and Muslims*. The panel was designed to deal with covering religion stories, and his list of do's and don'ts was read to us. Here is a sampling of them:



- Do talk to more women, who are a majority of all Muslim populations.
- Do not assume just because a person claims to represent Muslim communities, that he or she does.
- Do not say, “The Muslim World.” There is no Muslim World.
- Do more stories about Muslim women not involving hijab, or the burqa, or honor-killing.
- Do not assume all Muslims can talk about Islam.
- Do diversify your portfolio of token Muslims. Different Muslim super heroes have different superpowers.
- Do more stories on **Zayn Malik**. Teenage girls love Zayn Malik. (22-year-old British singer / songwriter)

Most of his do's and don'ts would also be good advice for media when talking to Christians – such as: “Don't assume the one you're talking to represents all Christians.”



Two more observations from the RCC meeting:

- I met a young woman named Sarah Abraham. Her name makes me think of Sarah and Abraham, who play a prominent role in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. And interestingly, Sarah Abraham is the most interfaith person I've ever met. Her father is a Palestinian Jew. Her mother is a Cajun Catholic. In college, she attended a United Methodist Church, but is now converting to Judaism. Her boyfriend, an atheist, grew up Southern Baptist. (It's hard to keep track of the faith groups.)
- During our meeting, we were picketed by the Westboro Baptist Church. You may have seen them picketing somewhere; you've certainly seen them in the national news. They carried their typical signs:
 - America is Doomed
 - God H8S Fag Marriage

- Bloody Obama
- Your Pastors are Whores
- The Jews Killed Jesus
- Love Thy Neighbor Equals Rebuke
- ... and several more

We never knew exactly what they came to protest in our case. They showed up when the State Department person was scheduled to talk, but that was Saturday morning and it appeared Saturday morning might have just been a convenient time to show up and hold up the protest signs.

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What I have brought back to you now is a smattering of highlights from the RCC meeting in Alexandria. I'm sure there have been a couple of thoughts here that have sparked associations in your mind. And there have been others that have meant nothing, really – especially when I run through each concept in just a few words.

The real question, then, is what this collection of little pieces, knick-knacks of thought from my trip, really means for us here at Church of the Covenant. If I didn't return with a Tee-shirt, then *what did I bring back?*

I think it is this set of three basic thoughts:

Thought Number One: Religion is an important force in American culture, and religion is an important force all over the world. This needs to be recognized as we interact in the U.S. and internationally.

Thought Number Two: All religions are different. Most of us know very little about other people's religions, and therefore we don't trust people of other faiths.

Thought Number Three: All religions relate to the same human needs, and they exist for the same reasons.

I'm going to leave the first thought to stand on its own: *Religion is an important force in the U.S. and around the world. That's just true.*

Let's take a bit of a look at thought number two: *All religions are different.* People have a way of looking for answers. Wherever cultures have developed, people have asked the questions of how the world came about, what life means, what death means, why there is pain, and how we should all treat each other. Within each culture, people have found a way to search out answers. In the centuries between 800 BC and

300 BC, people like Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah all defined ways to think about God. During this time, the primitive notions that already existed about a deity became more real, more defined. Eventually, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam grew into major monotheistic faiths. At the same time, Hinduism and other Eastern faiths became major faiths that recognize a number of gods.

In all these emerging cultures, people had the same questions. In all these cultures, the answer has been that God (or the gods) make sense of our world and give us hope. But the details of how to relate to God are different. The rules, or doctrines, of the faiths are different. And the stories, though very similar, are different. The history of each faith is different.

Think of the disparities right here in the United States: There is a significant difference between an ELCA Lutheran and a Missouri Synod Lutheran. There is a difference between a United Methodist and a member of the American Methodist Episcopal Church. A member of the Church of Christ would likely not be comfortable in the United Church of Christ. If even these Christian groups are so much different in theology and understanding, how much different are other faiths, like Jewish and Muslim and Hindu?

Yes, religions are different, and very few people who are members of a faith group have much of an understanding of other groups. And because the others are different, we have trouble trusting the others, and maybe we think they are simply wrong, off-base, inadequate, maybe even evil.

And yes, faith is a battle line. Faith is crucial for us as we try to understand our relationship to the world, how to act, and how to interact with others. These are issues important to our very lives. And when questions arise, we turn to our faith to help us answer the questions.

As culture, the events of the world, and the occurrences of our lives raise issues, we turn to faith to find the right answer. In the world today, history, geography, and economy all place faith groups on different sides of issues, and battle lines are drawn.

Now we look at Thought Three: *All religions relate to the same human needs, and they exist for the same reasons.*

If you look at the prayers of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Native Americans, they are all different. But they all pray.

If you look at the worship of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Native Americans, they are all different. But they all worship.

If you look at the hopes of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Native Americans, they'll all be about the same.

At the top of the bulletin today, I included the way the concept of the Golden Rule is expressed in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. The Hindu version is the closest to the way we usually recite the Golden Rule: "Do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you." The Jewish version from the Talmud is the most dramatic and conclusive. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire law; all the rest is commentary."

All the major religions have a version the Golden Rule. In each religion it is seen as a significant rule of how people should act toward one another.

Every major religion is a system of rules and a collection of wisdom. They describe a way for people to act, and how to be a disciple of God.

Faith certainly is a Life Line. In every major religion, the faith system helps the believers deal with their own lives ... with the questions, the trials, and the joys of their lives.

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Last month, I gathered with religion communicators from dozens of faith groups. When it comes to the doctrines and practices of how the members of the RCC express their own faith, we often disagree. And that's just fine.

We gave awards to communicators of many faith groups to honor the quality of their work – no matter which faith group they promote.

We gave awards to secular writers and filmmakers, and to CBS-TV, PBS, and Oprah Winfrey's channel for work they did to explain faith efforts in American society – all kinds of faith efforts.

We learned much about ways in which the federal government partners with faith groups to work together in positive, interfaith ways.

We watched a faith group protest because it disagrees with so many things – so many we can't even understand them all. We did our thing and they did theirs, and we knew that we would all continue on with our own beliefs - without hurting one another.

As I said a few minutes ago, the Religion Communicators Council helps to inform my understanding of faith and of interacting with the world. I meet with people I appreciate and respect. I don't worship the same way as they many of them do, but they have my admiration and friendship.

I'm grateful for the separation of religion and government. Both are left to their own integrity. And I'm grateful both are working together, as partners, for the good of the people. What I bring back from Washington DC is word that many people of many faiths - and even of no faith at all - are good people doing good things. Together, they make the world better.

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I wondered, briefly, about focusing on the values of interfaith activities on a communion Sunday. Then I realized how perfect that is. Interfaith cooperation and respect is a matter of each group respecting others, while each fully participates in their own worship and rituals. Today is a day for Christians to gather in communion with all who follow Christ. At the same time, I honor those who follow their own faith, and I ask God to bless them in their prayers, in their worship, and in facing the trials of their lives.

Amen.