



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**Proclaim The Good News At All Times;  
Use Words When Necessary**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
October 4, 2009 - Stewardship Sunday

One of the epiphanies I received this summer during my annual study break is that I will always be a recovering fundamentalist.

I grew up believing in a certain package of “beliefs” about God and the Bible and this package of beliefs has not served me well. So much of my journey about the interplay of fear and love and the false self and the true self has been about not only having a life of freedom *from* fundamentalism, but more importantly and profoundly, about having a vibrant, transformative, compassion-filled and prophetic oriented relationship with the God beneath and beyond the word, “God.”

At the beginning of my summer study break each July, I go to a retreat center to read through all the passages of scripture appointed for the upcoming year. I’ve constructed a chart which I fill in. Part of what I put into the chart are the portions of the Bible which are speaking to me. I try to identify a theme for each Sunday in the upcoming program year, and then I bring the chart back to Pasadena, have a meeting with James Walker toward the end of July, and give him a copy of this chart so that he can continue matching hymns and anthems to the themes we will be addressing on Sundays during the upcoming year.

This past July the retreat center I choose was the hermitage of Casa De Maria in Montecito. On a break one day while in the main house of that retreat center, I wandered into a museum and store focused on the art work of the famous nun who lived there, Sister Corita Kent. The museum traces her development as both an artist, a woman religious, and a revolutionary activist. Her art culminated in painting important quotations portraying words in vibrant colors with compelling shapes to highlight the message she wanted to express. It was her art work that often publicized important peace and justice gatherings and protests during the turbulent 1960s and 70s in this country.

I was not only drawn to certain posters of her art work, of which I purchased small copies. But, more importantly, I asked myself in the moments of prayer afterwards why I was drawn to the particular posters I purchased. What were the messages that were speaking to my soul? One poster depicted the following quote from the philosopher, Albert Camus: “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.” Another was from the poet, Walt Whitman: “I am larger, better than I

thought. I did not know I held so much goodness within me.” Another from St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we celebrate today: “Let it be your privilege to have no privilege.”

You see, there is an organizing theme of hope, the intrinsic goodness of humanity, the call to self-criticism of one’s culture that runs through not only Sister Corita’s art work but ran through the times in which she was painting. The turbulence of the times was recalled in another poster I purchased of words of Abraham Lincoln: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.” The turbulence of those times were such that everything was up for re-examination because the status quo simply was not working. This message came from the underprivileged and the outcast of our nation and of the world, expressed from riots in major cities to acts of civil disobedience to an immoral war in Vietnam. The times were indeed so turbulent that the old dogmas and beliefs had to be profoundly criticized and in many cases trumped by something more valuable. A version of this phenomenon is going on in our country and our world today. The status quo with its old dogmas are not serving everyone well.

Hence the words on the other two and final posters that I purchased -- words about action and living a life of compassion. One is from Alfred North Whitehead’s call to a life of action. He said and Sister Corita painted, “Ideas won’t keep. Something must be done about them.” But the biggest revelation of my own state of being and the fact that I will ALWAYS be a recovering fundamentalist was this quotation from Abbe Pire that Sister Corita painted: He wrote, “What matters today is not what people believe or don’t believe but whether they care or don’t care.”

The Christian life, as we say here weekly, is about putting one’s faith into action – the exercise of practical, not theoretical caring. Dogmas, doctrines, theories, and beliefs are always to be trumped by compassionate action for all – a life in solidarity with those in our world who are vulnerable and outcast. This church here lives with that kind of values clarification. The church traditions that say that marriage can only be between a man and a woman are trumped here by the reality that all the baptized must have access to all the sacraments – including the sacrament of marriage. The dogmatic undoctinal misinterpretation by the IRS of certain tax regulations about what can be said during an election cycle and what can’t that is trumped here by the responsibility of this church to criticize foreign and domestic political policies when they violate or are out of alignment with our understanding of Jesus’s call to justice and peace for all.

And now last month more illumination comes from the writer, Karen Armstrong, a former nun who calls herself a “freelance monotheist.” Karen Armstrong has written a book that is bringing deep therapy to my journey. The book is her response to the so-called "new atheists." The book is called *The Case for God*. Armstrong shows how the rise in atheism was inextricably tied to the rise in Christian fundamentalism. Rise in fundamentalism; rise in atheism—something I just intuitively knew.

Armstrong shows that fundamentalism was a modern development in the history of Christianity. Fundamentalism became a formal "theology" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, putting forth a package of certain dogmas and doctrines which distorted what faith is all about. This took place not only in Evangelical circles but in Anglican circles, in Episcopalian circles; it took place in all the Protestant circles and in the Roman Catholic Church as well. And that package distorted faith to mean intellectual assent to a set of “beliefs.” Faith, Armstrong rightly claims, is not intellectual assent

to a certain package of "beliefs." Rather, faith is trust and love placed in the God beyond the God of language and theology. Fundamentalism tried to claim and still argues that every word in the Bible is literally true when that kind of factuality-based definition of truth was never the point of most of the writings in the Bible. Fundamentalism claims that God is some angry man in the sky wanting retribution on all who do not profess Jesus as their personal savior.

The rise in atheism was a reaction to this fundamentalism. Against fundamentalism's assertions there will of course be those who do not believe in that God. In fact, I don't believe in that God. There are people who won't believe in that religion. In fact, I don't believe in that religion. Hence those "non-believers" get labeled "atheists" or they claim that modifier for themselves as a way to have some physic and spiritual space as well as some basic integrity when they cannot bring themselves to believe in a God who threatens eternal punishment for not having a certain set of beliefs. Armstrong recalls that the first Christians actually and the early Muslims were both called atheists because they didn't believe in the God religion was then conventionally describing. Armstrong helped me understand why I have this intrinsic attraction to and love for atheists.

The use of religion is much more transformative than providing a set of certainties. Religion, Armstrong says, is about that part of our life -- soul confusion, suffering, death, injustice -- those parts of life where reason and thinking and theories have taken you as far as they can and then the human being is faced with the experience of "unknowing." That is where healthy religion provides its gifts. One most easily receives those gifts in the midst of being a member of a community that practices certain healthy spiritual exercises like the Eucharist, prayer, community-based mutual pastoral care. One most easily receives those gifts in the midst of being a member of a community that also practices a certain lifestyle that Armstrong calls the lifestyle of compassion. Practicing spiritual exercises coupled with living a lifestyle of compassion have the power to transform us.

St. Francis of Assisi is known for having real connections with animal life and the natural order, calling the earth "Mother Earth" and fire "Brother Fire" and being able to communicate with animals. And that is why our entire lawn was covered at 9:00 am this morning with hamsters, dogs and kitty cats and their owners who had come to have them blessed on St. Francis day and that's wonderful. But most profoundly, Francis was known for going against one of the dogmatic religious conventions relating to a certain class of outcasts. Religion itself supported categorizing these people as outcasts, as marginal. These outcasts were called lepers. They had to wear bells which they were supposed to ring whenever they moved near those who were not lepers so that people who didn't have leprosy would stay at arms length from them believing that if you touched them you would get leprosy. In a moment of transformation and enlightenment St. Francis was called by that inaudible voice that lives inside every human being to go and embrace them and to take them to the brook, "Sister Brook," to wash their wounds and to treat them like human beings. Francis wrote that that was the moment in which he was made new, he was transformed, by being in solidarity with outcasts.

Armstrong says that all healthy religion has a requirement that that religion be *practiced* just as doctors practice medicine and lawyers practice the law. Religious people who want to be aware of this *experience* of God must practice religion -- the emphasis on the practical. Francis talked about it this way: "Preach the gospel every day, use words only if necessary." Francis of Assisi felt a call to imitate Jesus which he found was the short cut to the easy life—the passport to the joyful life. To imitate Jesus in solidarity with the outcasts.

Jesus says in the gospel lesson appointed for today: “Come to me all you who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Practice it. Practice it with perseverance.

In my own journey of recovering from fundamentalism I have had to come to terms with the fact that the Bible is so often used as a road map, but it is possible to love the map and never go where the map tells you to go. I love my map and I hate you for not loving my map. But brothers and sisters, the map tells you to *GO* to compassion, to love, to prayer, to forgiveness, to caring for the sick, the hungry, the naked, the poor, to advocate for justice and peace and sustainability for all—that is where you are supposed to be going if you love this doggone map so much.

That, my friends, on this first Sunday in October is where Stewardship comes in. I’m not talking about some fundamentalistic way about doing Stewardship, I’m talking about the life-giving approach to Stewardship Not as a doctrine or a dogma, but as a spiritual practice to feel closer to God, to feel God within, to be transformed and made new, simply because of my giving my money away.

My wife and I give to All Saints ten percent of our combined income so that in community with you all, we can do what we otherwise could not do alone – provide worship experiences that give life and save lives, provide for pastoral care for the sick, to provide care for the distraught, the despairing and the dying, and always to provide for those who do not have a voice or whose voice is belligerently excluded from political policies.

This is the year for you to pledge to the work of this place not in some kind of duty-oriented way, not as just tipping God, but as a spiritual exercise that you are practicing with perseverance knowing that there is this mysterious mystical truth that when you and I give, we receive. And the more that we give, the more that we receive. And in giving, you and I help save lives. In giving, you and I discover more and more how we are like God. My God, I am divine because the Divine One is foremost and centrally the One who gives life away. And when I give I’m more like God.

St. Francis who preached the gospel everyday used words when necessary. All Saints Church is known for what it does; we aren’t known so much for what we say. It’s that practical Christianity thing again. Christianity has to be practiced to grow and rather than being strong on words with some money thrown in All Saints is strong on generous giving of money with a few words thrown in.

Last night, just to speak about spiritual practices, I couldn’t go myself but I watched on a webcast the gala performance at the Hollywood Bowl welcoming Gustavo Dudamel the new conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Symphony and it was ecstatic. The culmination of the evening was his conducting Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, *Ode to Joy*. On the screen they projected while the singers were singing in German they projected the translation in English and Spanish and I couldn’t help but listening to it as a recovering Fundamentalist.

It starts—*Oh friends, not those tones, the tones of judgment and punishment and division and certain groups being more privileged before God than others. Let us raise our voices in more pleasing and more joyful sounds. And then JOY, in Spanish ALEGRIA.*

*Thy magic reunites those whom stern custom has parted. All men [and women] become brothers [and sisters] under they gentle wing.*

*Be embraced, millions. This kiss of joy is for all the world. Brothers and sisters above the starry canopy know that the One above us is the father [the mother.].*

We're not talking about happiness we're talking about the spiritual exercise of practicing joy that unites rather than divides that helps us be generous without fear, helps us band together in this church giving large percentages of our income so that the world can know the joy that we know. And when you and I do that and have a Stewardship like that then you and I can be used by God to turn the human race into the human family.

Amen.