

If God exists then why do religions do so many bad things?

Sunday, Jan. 6, 2008

Rev. David Tinney

Text: Micah 6:6-8 and Matthew 5:13-16

Theme: Does the fact that religion does so many bad things mean that God does not exist or that all religions are inherently evil? Not at all – religions are the creation of humankind and bear the flaws of humanity.

I would like to start today's sermon with a note of gratitude. I have received so much positive response to the sermon series that I started last week entitled "If God exists..." Early indication is that it is going to be a powerful series that will make us all think about our beliefs in new ways and hopefully grow deeper in our faith in the process. If you were not here last week I would encourage you to either download a written or audio copy of the sermon from our website so you can be caught up. I would also encourage you to pick up the insert from last week's sermon and if you need it the cover for the entire series. As I said this is a sermon series that is very different from the norm and would be a great one to share with friends and family, so find a way to pass it along or invite folks to worship.

Today I would like to preach the second sermon in the series entitled and deal with the question why do religions do so many bad things? This is a tender subject for me because I make my living as a religious professional and I hate to be critical of the institution that means so much to me. Yet I am embarrassed nearly every week by a position that is taken, or a claim that is made, or an action that is taken in the name of God or the Church (with a capital C). Do you know what I mean?

In the preface to his book, "The God Delusion," Richard Dawkins writes, "Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles', no 'honor killings', no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for crimes of showing an inch of it." I imagine you could add to this list with stories of a teacher who was threatened with flogging because she named the class teddy bear "Mohammed," or a pastor who took advantage of young girls in his church saying that it was the will of God, or riots stemming from the publication of silly political cartoons.

Do you ever wonder if the world would be a better place without religions? Sometimes I do.

As I have been reading the works of some of today's leading atheists I have discovered that many have chosen their belief system (or lack of belief system) as a direct response to the evil they see in religion. Some would ask, "How can I believe in a God of love and justice when I don't see it happening or being lived out in religion?" Good question.

This morning I would like to look at the top four criticisms that atheists level at religion and see if they are correct. When I say religion I am talking about all religion, not just Christianity, but I will only defend what I know and that is our faith. The criticisms include:

- Religion is used to oppress people.
- Religion too often takes advantage of the weak and the vulnerable, the very people it is supposed to protect.
- Religion is wrongly focused. It is more focused on sexual morality and on individual salvation than on the suffering of others in the world.

- Religion is really a human based rewards system that promotes self centeredness rather than true altruism.

How does that sound as a list? Before you kiss these critiques off as ridiculous let me say that I think there is some truth in all of them. The truth is limited and is more a result of the atheists' focus on the wacky fringe elements, or the black and white fundamentalists, or those who use religion for power and greed, and not on those who are using religion as a way to spiritual transformation and transformation of the world.

Let's look at the first point – religion is used to oppress people. It is easy to think of examples where this either took place or continues to take place. As we learned in the comparative religions sermon series of last year, the Hindus oppress an entire class of people in their caste system. The “untouchables” are considered the dregs of society and are supposed to perform the nastiest, most demeaning jobs. Their suffering is part of their path to salvation and therefore should not be interfered with by those who want to help.

Women have always been a target of religious oppression. In Islam women do not have the same rights or privileges as men. Our conservative Christian, and Eastern Orthodox, and Catholic brothers will not allow women to be ordained and in some places are not allowed to even give instruction to men. The latter stems from a few words Paul said in his letters that bolster some unspoken prejudices.

In the 1800s slavery in the United States was justified by religion. Jefferson Davis, the president of the confederacy, said that it was justified by both biblical testaments and that slavery was ordained by God. Many white preachers used a passage from Genesis 9 where Noah's son Ham was cursed to prove that Ham's descendents (black Africans) were destined by God for eternal slavery. Given more time I could cite many more examples.

Religion is an invention of humankind and it bears the flaws of humanity. Theologies, scriptural interpretations, and religious policies often reflect the narrow vision, or a prevailing fear, or a political or ecclesial imperative of the time. Atheists would claim that religion is nothing more than humankind (mostly men) putting all sorts of oppressive rules and ideas on the lips of God. I would be lying if I said there was no truth to some of their claim. All religious institutions have been guilty at one time or another of distorting God's great Kingdom vision to meet their own needs or to assuage some deep fear. But it is God's authentic vision that eventually transforms the oppressive doctrine or redeems the fear into trust.

Each religion has at its core a part of this holy and transforming vision that calls humankind to a higher walk with God and with each other. For the Jews it best expressed in the words of the prophet Micah. “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord.” In Christianity it is the words spoken by our Lord summarized in what we call the Sermon on the Mount which confronts power, lust, greed, anger, resentment, and violence and calls us to higher living. It is God's vision – not man's – that holds religion accountable and redeems even their most flawed theologies and policies.

The second point is religion takes advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Again there are plenty of examples both past and present. Recently a 19-year-old Saudi woman was gang raped by seven men. The Saudi Justice Ministry using religious law was ready to condemn her and sentence her to six months in prison and 200 lashes until it buckled under international pressure. Warren Jess, the leader and prophet of the splinter group Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ, was recently arrested for among other things mistreating the young women in his community. He told women as well as teen age girls that God told him they needed to submit their bodies to him and to the other men in the community. This man who had 60 wives, preached that a man must have at least three wives in order

to get into heaven and that women had to be invited into heaven by a man so they needed to do all that men wanted. This mistreatment was all done in the name of God.

Young vulnerable boys were mistreated by priests they trusted – in the name of God. Gullible believers have been bankrupted by shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists – in the name of God. Does religion do bad things in the name of God? Yes! Does that mean all religion is bad? Does that mean all priests, preachers, and pastors are abusers? Of course not!

There are an estimated 586,000 clergy in the United States today¹ and the great majority act responsibly. We only hear about the few that abuse their power and we should hear about them. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't exist and that all religion is evil. When a doctor abuses his or her patient when they are vulnerable does that mean we distrust all doctors and give up on medicine? When police officer abuses his or her power making a traffic stop, does that mean that all police officers are evil? Of course not!

Physicist Stephen Weinberg says, "Good people will do good things and bad people will do bad things but for good people to do bad things this takes religion."² Do we really believe this? After the Holocaust in World War II many people wrestled with the question how could good people become accomplices in the atrocities instigated by people like Eichmann? Stanley Milgram, at Yale University launched a study that would try to make sense of it.

He hired individuals to play the role of teacher while an actor played the role of student. The "teachers" were introduced to the "experimenter" who was a stern faced man in a lab coat and to the "student" who was sitting in the next room strapped to a chair and wired with electrodes. The "teacher" was supposed to ask the "student" questions and for every wrong answer was supposed to turn up the voltage on a generator in front of them. The voltage went from 15-450 volts or a fatal shock.

To Milgram's amazement 65% of the "teachers" cranked the voltage to the max even when they heard the "student" screaming in pain in the other room.³ Why? Because of authority. The man in the lab coat told them to do it. It is easy to blame religion for being the source of evil but often it is just the misuse of authority in any institution.

Point three – religion is wrongly focused. In his book "A Letter to a Christian Nation," Sam Harris scolds Christians for being more concerned about sexual morality and individual salvation than about the suffering going on around the world and about the growing disparity between the poor and the rich. He goes on with example after example of where he sees this played out in our society but we don't have enough time today to look at them all. Let me just say that I think he makes a good point here and that his criticism is very much on target.

I believe that the American Christian Church has been hijacked from its Kingdom mission by issues that are unnecessarily divisive and contentious. I believe the Church allows the hijacking so that it doesn't have to address the harder social issues of justice, greed, power, war, environment, and being a global citizen in an ever changing world. The critical outsider looks on with bewilderment and frustration as the Church does not live up to the message that is being preached within its walls.

Oh it's not just the atheists that are critical of our misplaced theological agenda. There are some of our leading prophets within the Church who have been speaking out for years but their words fall on deaf ears. They would say we spend too much time preaching about individual salvation and about reaching heaven while there is a lot of hellish injustice going on around us unnoticed. They would say that we spend a lot of time preaching a prosperity theology justifying the wealth that we all have while there are people dying for the lack of food or medicine. They would say that we care more about

legislating morality or making rules to keep people with different sexual orientations out of our churches or leadership or heaven while corruption goes on unchecked hurting the weak and vulnerable in our communities.

I was talking a few weeks ago to someone who was being very critical of the Church and he said that even though he is attracted to the teachings of Christ he says he finds the church and the people in it unattractive. His abridged critique includes the feeling that we are bitter, joyless, and judgmental, fixed on sexuality, blind to corporate greed, and deaf to the cries of the world's poor and marginalized.

He might be right and he is certainly entitled to his opinion. I believe however when the church, no make it this church, because that is all I can be responsible for. When this church is focused on healing and transforming in the Kingdom vision then we do become attractive and we start to look like the Christ we claim as our Lord.

Finally point number four – religion is about creating a rewards system for personal salvation that makes people even more self-centered and does away with true altruism. Once again there is some limited truth in this criticism. I would be lying if I didn't admit that there are many Christians who believe that if they score points in some heavenly book of life and are rewarded by salvation. There are also some who do good works out of fear of going to hell. Both beliefs destroy altruism and promote self-centeredness. But this is not the theology of grace which we believe.

We believe that God loved us so much, even before we deserved it, even before we “earned” it, that God gave the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Our theology is based on grace not works. When we finally embrace our belovedness and mature in our relationship with God and we lose some of the self-centeredness. We stop trying to prove to others and to God that we are worthy of being loved and simply live in the abundance of love that is already there.

Would the world be better without religion? No! Look around at what churches like ours have done. Look around our community, our state, our nation, our world at all the great work done by religious organizations. When religious institutions work properly they become the leaven to transform entire communities. When I think of all the social service agencies in the country, when I think of all programs that reach out to the homeless, battered women, poor, and marginalized I realize that nearly all of them have religious roots.

I don't need to justify the power of churches or religion with local, national, or international statistics. I need look no farther than my own life to realize that I am a better person because of my involvement with religion. It was the church that provided education, companionship, inspiration, and the assurance of my belovedness without having to earn it. It was the church that held me accountable for my behavior and gently pointed me back on track. It was the church that acted out grace so that I could learn it firsthand and not from a book. It was the church that demonstrated that the “body of Christ” is alive when we place our faith in God and do his work.

When I hear the harsh criticisms against religion I need to remind myself they are human invention. I don't worship religion – I worship GOD!

¹ Adam Hamilton, “God? Conversations with an Atheist” from Church of the Resurrection, 2007

² Adam Hamilton, same.

³ <http://www.new-life.net/milgram.htm>