

"Welcoming the Truth" by Pat Conover

03/30/2003 by Pat Conover at United Church of Christ, St. Louis, MO: Welcoming the Truth

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Epiphany

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Sermon by Pat Conover given at United Church of Christ, St. Louis, MO

Text: John 3:18-21

No one who puts faith in Jesus comes under judgment; but the unbeliever has already been judged because of not putting faith in God's only son. This is the judgment, the light has come into the world but the people preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil. Wrongdoers hate the light and avoid it, for fear that their misdeeds should be exposed. Those who live by the truth come into the light so that it may be clearly seen that God is in all they do.

Thank you for being the first congregation in the United Church of Christ to formally endorse the transgender

resolution for General Synod by a vote of the congregation. It is a precious gift.

I thought about preaching a sermon about transgender experience and expression as one channel of God's grace. There is a good story here and I feel the need to share it. I ache to tell the story for my many transgender friends who have been hurt so much by Christendom. However, I am caught up in the pressing spiritual issues that come with being a Christian in a nation engaged in an unjust war.

The passage from John, part of the lectionary for this week, is an extension of the famous passage about God loving the world and sending Jesus to illuminate the world so that salvation might come. Jesus did not shrink from the task. He was transparent unto death so that we could see what love looks like, love that will do what needs to be done to show that it is more valuable than life itself.

The passage is interesting, in part, because it shows forth the centuries-old conflict in Hebrew Scripture, in the gospel writers, and among early Christians. Each claimed a specialness of story, a specialness of relationship to God, as well as the worship of a universal God not bound by national lines or priestly contortions. Here again we see the echoes of the universal God of Moses, "I Am," and the identification with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

That is where we are going with this sermon today. This is a sermon about the United States, land that I love, carrying visions of democracy, liberty, and the common good that cannot

be distorted by the scoundrels of our current national leadership who lead by deceit and bring forth death and alienation.

Let me be clear about my own biases and perspectives so you can take them into account as you listen for any truthful word I might be able to share. I am not an absolute pacifist. I served in the Army and there are times when I think it is right to fight for one's country. I oppose the war in Iraq because it is wrong. I oppose our support of the war in Colombia because it is wrong.

Neither is a war of self-defense. Neither is a war of liberation. Both are wars of a new imperialism. The United States has been involved in many other wars that were wrong, long before the current president took office. George W. Bush did not invent preemptive first strike wars. Perhaps you remember Granada, the Bay of Pigs, and the decades of sending the Marines into Central and South America in support of the Monroe Doctrine and the United Fruit Company.

I only have time for one sermon today and so I will illustrate my concerns with the escalation of the war on Iraq. I say escalation, because we have not stopped attacking Iraq since 1991. We have launched repeated air strikes and forced horrible conditions on the Iraqi people that have killed hundred of thousands while the attacks in 1991 killed only tens of thousands.

Much as I want to vent my anger against the president, to denounce the lies he has told and is telling, to denounce his

new imperialism through rules of trade that favor the United States, that exploit workers and raw materials around the world, I find myself preaching to you and not to the president. I find myself preaching to my own raw conscience. I find myself looking for forgiveness and salvation once again for I have fallen short of loving the Iraqi people in their decade of need. Like so many others, I have only turned my attention and caring to them when we have chosen to expand our attacks and expose some of our brothers and sisters in the United States to death.

I also want to make it clear before proceeding any further, that I am also deeply concerned for our own troops. I respect the professionalism, courage and dedication of our soldiers and I am outraged that their trust is being misused for purposes that are not worthy of their sacrifice.

Caring about the truth leads me first to confession. Maybe some of you can claim ignorance of the circumstances that have led us into this expansion of the war on Iraq, but I cannot. I studied enough in 1991 to learn about how we had supported Saddam Hussein in his attack on the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran, how we supported Saddam Hussein in his repression of the fundamentalists in Southern Iraq, the majority of the Iraqi population, and how we stood aside after the armistice in 1991 while Saddam Hussein took his armies North to wage genocide against the Kurds, the Kurds we had lured into battle through the activities of the CIA.

I knew about how terrible sanctions were, even though I have been learning more in the last few months. The president is talking piously about rebuilding the water supply in Iraq, the water supply that has been the source of so much disease, the

water supply repairs we have repeatedly blocked in the U.N. committee that was created to oversee the "Oil for Food" program. We would not let the Iraqi's repair their water supply with their own money because we claimed the water pumps might be used for making weapons of mass destruction.

Our United Church of Christ office in Washington, DC repeatedly protested the horrible sanction conditions, protested the strategy of trying to make things so horrible for the Iraqi population that they would start a civil war. Saddam Hussein survived one rebellion and assassination attempt after another. Is it any surprise that he hates and distrusts us? His behavior is not paranoid, as some psychologizers would have it. It is the reasonable response of someone who has been 12 years fighting for his life. I have no illusions about the honesty of Saddam Hussein, no illusions about his brutality, no illusions about his caring for the Iraqi people beyond his own tribe. Nevertheless, it is not the evil qualities of Saddam Hussein's character that drew us into this war. There are other brutal dictators in the world today, as bad or worse.

I participated in a background briefing of those pursuing peace in the Middle East in 2001 when it became clear that Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Chaney were going to shape the foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East. These are well known people with well-known views. The question we met to discuss two years ago was whether the Bush administration would attack Iraq or Iran first. Myself, I was betting on Iran. Some Islamic fundamentalists are enemies of stability and progress in the Middle East. I speak of those fundamentalists engaged in terrorism, the ones who were doing so much horror in Afghanistan. Iran is a much stronger country than Iraq. It is more influenced by Is

lamic fundamentalists with more credible ties to terrorism, and, as recently revealed, an advanced nuclear capacity.

Recently, Donald Rumsfeld was asked whether the United States was going to attack Iran as well. He answered that the president was going to continue the war against terrorism in the Middle East, so maybe my fears of an expanding war are not unfounded.

The views of Wolfowitz, et al, are long grounded in the "real politics," the unvarnished power politics, the unabashed politics of advancing the interests of the United States, pretty much defined as advancing the interest of U. S. corporations. The only thing the Middle East is selling that we have a big interest in is oil. The interest is to keep the world market price of oil low by keeping a large supply of oil flowing. We do not need to directly steal the oil of Iraq. We get the great majority of foreign oil in the United States from Canada, Mexico and Venezuela. While we do not take much oil from Iraq, the price of oil is negotiated on a single international market. The price of the oil we bring in from Venezuela is strongly influenced by how much oil comes out of Saudi Arabia, the only nation that can quickly raise or lower their output by millions of barrels a day. Iraq is second only to Saudi Arabia in oil reserves and it could similarly affect the international price of oil.

The president has talked about everything but oil in his numerous explanations of why the U.S. had to attack Iraq. This is hardly surprising since Bush and Chaney are Texas oilmen, and Chaney was the chief executive of Haliburton, the corporation that built much of the oil infrastructure in Iraq. They are deeply versed, deeply embedded in the Middle Eastern

politics of oil, and I am convinced that is what they mean whenever they use the euphemism of U. S. national interests, or U.S. strategic interests.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 were a wake up call that the Islamic fundamentalist networks that support terror can hit the U.S. They present a real danger. The Taliban in Afghanistan presented a real danger. Saddam Hussein is many things, but he is not an Islamic fundamentalist. In fact, Osama bin Laden accurately describes him as an infidel.

Remembering that we used Saddam Hussein to attack the fundamentalists in Iran and to suppress the fundamentalists in his own country, it would be surprising if there were any alliance. There has been no credible evidence of such an alliance despite repeated assertions. The only terrorist activity was in the Northern part of Iraq, the area controlled by the Kurds and already one focus of the current attacks.

The next most important lie is about liberating the Iraqi people. They did not ask us to attack. They do not trust us because of our horrible treatment of them through the sanctions. This is no apology for Saddam Hussein, just remembering the truth about our own claims. President Bush, to his credit, has promised a lot of attention to minimizing the effects of war on the Iraqi people and the armed forces seem to be doing what can be done for the civilian population in the midst of fighting a war.

The fact that we were once again willing to sell out the Kurds to Turkey in exchange for launching an attack from their

territory, and the long history of opposition to Islamic fundamentalists, makes it unlikely that we will allow a representative democracy to emerge. Lately we have heard only that the administration wants the Iraqi people to rule themselves. That sounds to me like either the creation of a puppet government or simply turning the country over to the current ruling elites without Saddam Hussein and his family.

I am one who turned a blind eye when we supported the Taliban in their attacks on the former Soviet Union, used their bases to spread terrorism and revolution through the several areas that have now split off from the former Soviet Union. I turned a blind eye when we gave weapons of mass destruction to Saddam Hussein to use against Iran.

Goodness knows there are plenty of other things to worry about in this country and around the world. None of us can keep all the wars in front of us, all of the attacks on the basic social institutions of this nation, from public schools, to Medicaid and Medicare, to Social Security, to Head Start and Food Stamps, to immigration issues, to the environment, to the numerous assaults on civil liberties and to the appointment of radical conservative judges. To keep up, we need everybody to do his or her part, and we need to work together. Though I had only a small part of the work of our office opposing the sanctions on Iraq, I was glad to be part of the United Church of Christ, which was at least trying.

Everything we do, our worship, our education of ourselves and our children, the way we build community and grow the skills of transforming conflict into shared diversity, the way we engage each other for healing and for accountability in whatever Christian callings we claim, all this can contribute

to being a peace and justice congregation. We need to know who we are and whose we are. We need to shape all the ways we engage each other and the world around us so that justice may smell sweet and peace may grow. Above all, we need to care. We need to care, to pray fervently, whatever our personal callings are. Those who are activists among you need to know they have the love and support of a caring congregation.

I could stop here, but there is one more turn to this sermon.

I celebrate the universal values and human virtues of love, justice, peace, truth and beauty. I thank God that I am a human being who can touch and celebrate such wonderful things. I am so thankful that we have the privilege of contributing to the shaping of a nation for such wonderful purposes. However, the reality is that I dwell in a tribe. My tribe does not look like the old tribes of Israel that joined to fight for living space. Amazingly, in the process, the tribes created a nation built on law. They carried the precious seed that even kings were accountable before God for the justice and injustice of their deeds.

My tribe is made up of the people who follow the risen Christ. We see beyond national interest because we worship a God who is sovereign of all; not merely sovereign of all, but caring for all; not merely caring for all, but long engaged with everyone. I live within my own story, within my own tribe, but the God I know goes before me, is present in others before I arrive. When I meet Islamic fundamentalists, I meet people who are engaging God within their story. I want to hear that story. I want to share my story. Moreover, I give thanks that I worship a God who was not stuck within the stories of the time of Jesus but could do a new thing among us. Our job is not merely to remember our own story, but to learn from it so that we can recognize what God is about in every story.

Our challenge is not that Moslems are not Christians, but that we are not sufficiently Christian. I feel so good to be among you this morning because I sense that you are part of the vital spirit movement of Christianity; you have not settled for holding a spot in Christendom.

When Jesus met the woman at the well in Samaria, he had real news. He was a Jew who agreed with the Samaritans that you did not have to go to Jerusalem to worship God. This was the big sticking point between Samaritans, descendants of the Northern tribes of Israel, and the Jews. However, neither were the Samaritans right. God was not limited to their hill shrines either. God can be worshiped anywhere because God is accessible everywhere. When we humble ourselves and hold our story lightly, it is not because we are confused and lack faith. It is because we find our story precious and know that there are chapters still to be written, chapters of reconciliation and healing. It is because we know there are many things to learn about God, and how people embrace God.

Because we are grounded in our Christian story that we know that our God is a just God and that we have earned God's judgment as sinners. We have lived out of national self-interest and pretended it was good. We have shut our eyes when we should have been crying in solidarity with all the people we have injured. We have earned the enmity and alienation we see in those who rise up against the United States, including those who have learned we can be attacked within our fortress. In the midst of our anger and fear, in the midst of knowing we too deserve our safety, we must return to confession again and again so that we might be saved, saved from our own unwillingness to attend to the harder truths, the painful

truths. We might be saved from our unwillingness to PAY attention to what is hurting in us and in others.

Because we are grounded in our Christian story, we know that our God is a God of grace, a God who met us in Jesus of Nazareth, and is waiting for us every day. God invites you and me this very moment to embrace the risen Christ, to know Jesus as our savior. However, we cannot hold Jesus for ourselves as if he were a bag of bones in a cathedral. We can only stay in touch with the Christ if we are willing to go where Jesus went, to see what Jesus saw, to give ourselves away as Jesus made a gift of himself so that others might live, so that others might see.

I just cannot carry all this truth by myself. I made my commitment to Christ a long time ago and I know where I stand, and I know that is not enough. I cannot pay attention everywhere. I cannot do all the things that need be done, go to all the places where there is hurting and need. I can only hold all this truth if you will hold it with me. I need to know that you are doing your part and I praise God for the good reports I have had from reading your newsletter over the years, and from hearing your stories in person.

We not only need each other, we need our brothers and sisters who are Islamic fundamentalists, people who do not know our stories and are likely to distrust them when we have our first chances to share. Even so, I bring you some good news in the midst of wars alarms, in the midst of the pain and depression from seeing on television the wages of our sin. David Hilfiker, a wonderful Christian, recently returned from Iraq, and told us how the people of Iraq welcomed him. The everyday Iraqi people could tell the difference between what the

president is doing with all of that terrible power and what David and his colleagues were doing to create healing and solidarity. David is a doctor and his heart was breaking for the disease and death that we have wrought for years before this escalation of our attacks. I need David. I need our numerous Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq. I need to know that even though I am not there in Iraq that God is there, there in the midst of all that is terror and dismay. I need to know that David saw and David wept, just as Jesus wept because Jerusalem was a city that did not know the things that make for peace.

I do not ask you to try harder, though that might be the word of accountability some of you need to hear. Today I merely ask you to share grief, to share hope. We did not stop this war, but we might stop the next one. We need to be wherever people are being killed and oppressed, be it by war or by systemic oppression without any shooting. We need to be in solidarity through prayer, by supporting acts of mercy such as the Olive Branch program of Church World Service, and by witnessing for justice and peace in the United States. I ask you to know yourselves as carriers of a precious story, not merely followers of Jesus, but carriers of the living Christ, full of confession and compassion, full of hope that the words of war and oppression are not the last words, nor the most important words. I need to celebrate with you the God of universal truth and justice. I need to live with you in the Christian tribe that knows its own story and gives it away.

Thanks be to God, living Word, source of truth, present at the intimate beginnings of creation, and present among us today. For God so loved and loves the world..