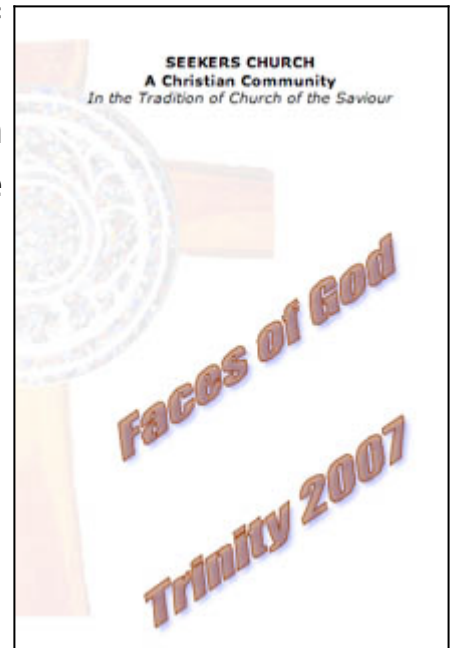


Right, Left, Straight, Circle by John Morris

This sermon is inspired by a lot of doubts I've had recently about what attitude to take toward the Christian Right – or more broadly, toward people who claim to be Christians but live it out in ways I disagree with.



It's a sermon full of confusion and contradiction, and I want to warn you beforehand that it starts that way and just keeps going. Fifteen minutes from now, I'm going to sound just as uncertain as I did at the beginning. It's not the kind of sermon that clarifies or offers insight – other than an insight into what it feels like to live in the tension of opposing spiritual demands. That's too bad, because I like the other kind of sermon – the kind where I'm pretty sure I'm right about something – and both of my previous sermons were that kind. This one, as I say, is not.

Occasionally I may move around up here, as a way of physically embodying this sense of opposing pulls and uncertain ground.

I'll start . . . over here.

A few Sundays ago, Katie and I were here for worship on a particularly happy occasion: We heard Julia preach for the first time, and enjoyed her message about the compatibility of Christianity and evolution. We sang some fine hymns praising

Jesus, and basked in the warmth of this wonderful community of friends and companions.

That night, we went to a concert by Todd Rundgren – not a household name for all of you, I’m sure, but Katie and I both consider him one of the best contemporary songwriters and performers. At the show, we sang along enthusiastically with one of Todd’s trademark songs: “Fascist Christ,” it’s called, and the lyrics are a highly sarcastic evocation of the Christian Right and the dreadful uses of the image of Christ in their theology.

Driving home, Katie said to me, “Well, that was quite a Sunday – singing hymns in church in the morning, and then singing about ‘Fascist Christ’ in a club at night.”

Until Katie pointed it out, it had not even occurred to me that anyone looking at us from the outside might think that was strange. To me, there was absolutely no contradiction. I am a person who loves God and tries to follow Jesus, and also a person who sees no blasphemy – quite the opposite – in expressing my disgust for an image of Jesus that is indeed fascist. But perhaps the contradiction is there nonetheless...

“Fascist Christ” . . . that’s about as disturbing a combination of words as I can imagine. What can this song be about? Here are some of the lyrics, which are delivered in a declamatory, pseudo-rap style:

Let’s get fundamental about this strange philosophy

In which God and man are enemies

In which there is no serenity unless you happen to believe

Precisely what they want you to believe, and no diversity

Come join the army and learn the noises

That drown out the others' voices and please the devil

Who rejoices when mankind has no choices

And power exploits us, and peace avoids us

Pretty clearly, these lines are about power and coercion. They paint a picture of a religion that demands rigid obedience and uses violence to achieve its ends. Who could disagree that such a worldview is fascist? If fascism refers to anything beyond the actual political parties that adopted it in the last century, it means a cruel, intolerant, and violent social institution. This is the charge these lyrics levy at Christians, or at least at one part of Christianity.

Note too how cleverly the song embeds certain code-phrases: "fundamental," "diversity," "no choices." Todd wants to leave no doubt about which part of Christianity he's accusing of pleasing the devil: It's the fundamentalist Christian Right, who is anti-diversity and anti-choice. And a subsequent verse makes clear that both diversity and choice should be taken to refer specifically to sexual diversity and sex-related choices: "Here comes the sex police, they're at your bedroom door," go the lyrics.

Hmm. Does this sound like you and me? And yet we here at Seekers, and the folks down the road at your friendly neighborhood Christian Right Evangelical House of Coercion, would both claim that the word "Christian" names a deep and important truth about us.

As for which of us has succeeded better in associating their beliefs with that word "Christian" in the public mind – well, there's no contest.

We live in a nation whose media largely control the image of what it means to be a Christian. This is to say nothing special about Christians or Christianity – the media largely control the image of everything we see and know that's outside

our direct experience. Because the media are, as a group, extremely interested in both sex and politics, it's inevitable that the picture they paint of American Christians should focus on Christian individuals and institutions who have a lot to say on those subjects. And at the moment, that means the Christian Right. Sex and politics – boy, do we ever know what the Christian Right thinks about sex and politics.

But increasingly I find myself wondering; don't we "progressive Christians" bear some responsibility here? It's all very well to say, "Well, the media will always publicize the most sensational, provocative viewpoints, especially when the view pointers are able to turn out millions of votes at the polls. That's not our fault." Maybe it is our fault. Maybe we should have spoken out years ago, and said as clearly as possible, "Excuse me? Pat Robertson may say he's a Christian but as a matter of fact he's mistaken. He has no business using that word."

Whoah. Now what have I just said here? I seem to be claiming I can look into the heart of a man I've never met and declare him a non-follower of Jesus, and a liar to boot. That's a tall order.

It's also characteristic of the game the Christian Right plays against me. Robertson would, I presume, not hesitate to declare me a heathen, bound straight for hell on so many counts I can hardly begin to name them. And up until now, my response – and the response, I think, of many of my progressive Christian friends, including many here at Seekers – is to instead play the "Brotherhood" card. I come on all nice. I refuse to fight fire with fire, arrogance with arrogance, and instead mumble stuff like, "Well, I can't look into Pat Robertson's heart and know whether he really likes Jesus, and who knows how much of an asshole he'd be if he weren't a Christian, and anyway Jesus told us to seek unity and not judge people and treat all people as brothers and sisters. And remember the Thirty Years' War? Classic example

of what happens when Christians start to object to what other Christians do on Sundays.”

All good points, of course. I hate picturing myself as arrogant, judgmental, and intolerant. On the other hand, I'm getting sicker and sicker of picturing myself as conciliatory, weak-kneed, and hypocritical. Because you know what? If I'm being truly honest, I don't think there's the slightest chance that some ignorant fire-and-brimstone preacher who believes faggots are going to hell and wants women to shut up and cook his dinner is living like a Christian. No, not the slightest chance. Has he been born again? Does he have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Beats me – there, I have to admit; I can't get inside him and see. But whatever connection he may have with the Lord is bearing no useful fruit whatsoever – quite the contrary, he's a walking disgrace to Christians everywhere. As the reading from Galatians today put it, he “perverts the Gospel of Christ.”

And if all this is true, shouldn't we be saying so?

But hold on. That can't be right. What about the Gospel message, which tells me to get rid of the beam in my own eye before I start complaining about other people's myopia? Jesus, let's admit, had his judgmental moments, but I've always felt he was speaking in nomine patre, as it were – not the sort of behavior we're supposed to emulate, any more than he expected us to go around blasting fig trees. No, Jesus' idea seems to have been, Work out your own salvation and let me worry about those other nutjobs.

You know, when it comes to criticizing others' Christianity, I don't really come off so well. As Hamlet said, “I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not born me.” My everyday sins, my glaring inadequacies as a Christian, are obvious. It's entirely possible – and I really mean this, I'm not just speaking for the sake of argument – that day to day, hour by

hour, Pat Robertson behaves more kindly and generously toward his neighbors than I do. My real-time track record doesn't provide much of a platform for yelling at other people, even Pat Robertson.

Well yes but . . . is that really true? Does it follow that I can never, therefore, speak up and say, "Yo, Pat, you shouldn't be a queer-basher – Jesus wouldn't like that"? I mean, how despicable does the behavior have to get before it's OK to stand up, despite my own shortcomings, and point the finger? And do I really have to couch my accusation in all that namby-pamby, gee-I-could-be-wrong-and-of-course-I'm-no-saint stuff? They don't do that. The Christian Right comes right out and kicks my spiritual butt. Which, of course, is part of why I so deeply distrust their Christianity . . .and full circle we go, over and over.

Sometimes I think that coercive, my-way-or-the-devil's-way religionists aren't really religious at all. It's as if they use the same word, "Christian," to describe a set of beliefs and behaviors that have nothing to do with what I can recognize as my religion.

Scott Peck, in his book "The Different Drum," has an interesting thought about that. He describes four stages of spiritual life. Stage I he calls "chaotic and anti-social" – these are people with essentially no empathy or principles, people who've given almost no sincere thought to anything greater than themselves. Stage II he calls "formal and institutional." It's a reaction, and release, from the chaos of Stage I spirituality. People "get saved," quite literally, and cling to a new set of clear, often simplistic, principles of belief and behavior. The forms and rituals of a church may assume overriding importance. Does their "religion" condemn most everyone else to Hell? A small price to pay for one's own escape from the hell of psychological chaos.

Stage III spirituality Peck calls "skeptical and individual."

These are people who (often because they were raised in a stable Stage II family) don't really need the rules and regulations of traditional religion to save them from chaos. They often become the "good agnostics," the "caring secular humanists," the rationalists and truth-seekers and skeptics who we all know and respect, and who know and respect us while remaining deeply puzzled about why we should need something called "God."

Finally, Stage IV spirituality is "mystic and communal." As Peck puts it, "If people in Stage III seek truth deeply and widely enough, they find what they are looking for. . . They are able to get glimpses of the 'big picture' and to see that it is very beautiful indeed – and that it strangely resembles those 'primitive myths and superstitions' their Stage II parents believed in." Stage IV spirituality is characterized by a return to religion as the holder of mystery, not certitude – a place of questions, not answers. It is a way to connect with a God who is loving rather than judgmental, and to experience our full humanness, not merely the part of ourselves that seeks right-or-wrong answers. People at this stage are able to tolerate a good deal of that internal chaos that so frightens the Stage II believer in a "religion."

I may have gone on about this for too long, and I know I've oversimplified Peck's insight, but I think he's really onto something and it applies to my topic this morning. Clearly, using his framework, we progressive Christians have more in common with Stage IV spiritual types – we don't expect to find black-and-white answers in the Bible and we tolerate and even welcome a sense of mystery and incompleteness in our theology. Fundamentalist Christians would represent Stage II people, using religious forms as a kind of lifeboat to save them from an angry, threatening sea of conflicting passions.

And there are times when I take Peck's ideas one step further and ask myself, "Is he really right in calling Stage II people 'religious' at all? Or, if they're religious, do we need a

different word for what the Stage IV people are? Maybe the time has come to drop the whole pretense that Stage II and Stage IV people are even engaged in the same enterprise. The motivations are different, the attitudes are different, the beliefs are different, the behaviors are different . . . So what can possibly be prompting us to continue to call both groups 'Christian'?"

This viewpoint has a handy result – it means I can safely ignore the traditional Gospel teaching about unity. "Unity among believers" – fine, but those fundamentalists aren't believers; let's come right out and say so. I'm no more obligated to consider them my "brothers and sisters" and try to build bridges with them than I would be to make common cause with . . . well, with fascists.

There's something to this—And also something deeply wrong.

I could match my list of differences with another list, one of similarities. I may not like it or understand it, but fundamentalist Christians and I share the same traditions, the same history, the same Holy Book, the same myths, the same vocabulary. Most important of all, we share the same central claim: A relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, will change you forevermore. I don't understand how we can both believe this! But precisely because I don't understand, I recognize that, tempting though it is, I can't write off the Stage II people as non-Christians. ("Stage II people" . . . interesting, how a label can dehumanize.)

Maybe the right stance to take is a version of "Hate the sin but not the sinner." In this case: "Reject the behavior but not the behaver." Perhaps it's OK to say, loudly and clearly, "Homophobia is wrong. Opposing stem-cell research is wrong. Telling people they're going to hell is wrong. None of these are Christian behaviors," and leave it at that. No need to go further and pass a judgment on the essential Christianity of the behaver. Maybe he's having a bad day. Maybe Pat

Robertson is having a bad incarnation. Maybe we all need to do a bit less judging.

One thing's for sure, though: The media have given the microphone to the Christian Right for far too long. The result is painful to me: Smart, deeply spiritual people like Todd Rundgren feel they need to write a song called "Fascist Christ" in order to bring us to our senses. When Todd looks around at what "Christians" are doing these days, this is presumably what he sees: the Christian Right. And he's not alone. I am virtually a Christian closet-case among my non-Christian friends because, most days, I just don't have the energy to engage with them. I'm so tired of having to start by trying – and usually failing – to wipe away the filth and fuzz of the media-image of what it means to be a Christian. I know that's what they think when they think "Christian" – some idiot threatening them with hellfire because of what they do with their genitalia. And yet . . . my silence around them about my own understanding, and practice, of Christianity is undoubtedly part of the problem. The Christian Right is all too willing to speak up. That, in part, is why the media listen.

I told you when I began that I wouldn't be moving very far towards certainty in this sermon. All I can do is escort you around the same circles my mind travels in. And when you go in a circle, there's no obvious place to stop. So I think I'll take you to one more spot, and then end with a prayer.

Perhaps it's occurred to you that every single person I've mentioned so far this morning is someone I've never met. And perhaps that strikes you as a little odd. The people I've been calling "the Christian Right" or "fundamentalist Christians" exist for me as voices in the news or in filmed documentaries or as authors of articles and books. Even "Pat Robertson" is a kind of figment of my imagination – I claim to

know what he's said and done because our old friend the media tell me so. This, I repeat, is a little odd. It's not that I think the media are unreliable in this regard, but simply that they are reliable only in this regard. They can tell me nothing about how Pat Robertson treats his neighbor, only what Pat Robertson says is how a neighbor ought to be treated. I learn nothing from the news about how the fundamentalist Christian down the road speaks to his daughter – because this is too personal to be news. Yet it is in the personal that important truths about persons are to be found.

I'm not sure what the implications of this are, only that it's odd. All this energy and concern and anger and confusion over an image in my mind about people I've never met . . . Well, I've never met the people in Darfur either and I still feel entitled to have opinions about them. But isn't this a little different?

Or is it?

And on this note, let us pray: Lord, help us to find that field, that place beyond conflict and judgment, where all of your sons and daughters can meet to share your peace. And while we remain in the valley, help us to walk gracefully in the tension of uncertainty and mystery.

Amen.