

A REJECTION OF CHRISTIAN TERRORISM

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:14-21 NRSV

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38-48 NRSV

Hi there! I would like to introduce myself to you, both to those of you who don't know me well and even to those of you who do. I'm the guy who routinely sticks his foot in his mouth. I'm the guy who in so many different situations is the one who is oblivious to the line that most others don't cross, and so I just march right over it. I often leave many people unsettled and disturbed, despite my best efforts to be tactful and sensitive. Just ask my wife, it's a daily trouble for her.

I'm also the guy in various groups of people who, depending on what group I'm in, is judged as either too conservative or too liberal--or too this or too that. This keeps happening to me not because I believe I'm so much wiser than everyone else and I've

found this golden spot in the middle from which I can look down on others, but because (hopefully) I try to point out that so many things we take for granted as simple are really not so simple. The big issues that plague us in our culture do so because they are complex, no matter how we may wish it were otherwise.

The world we live in offers us a great amount of complex problems that we must wrestle with. As much as we might want them to be simpler, we can't wish them away. I believe how we wrestle with these complex problems as Christians and especially how we invoke the name of God as we do so matters a great deal. I believe our culture desires to boil down these complex issues to a level suitable for AM talk radio, and by doing so, it runs right over the pain people caught up in them endure.

This morning in a very short amount of time I'm going to be covering and touching on some of these troubling and complex areas of disagreement. I fear that either my words—one way or another--will bother most people in the room OR I'm going to be so timid in what I say that no one will be offended at all. I really hope, however, that neither one of these eventualities happens, but instead what I hope for is that we can reflect for a few minutes at least about how we as Christians, specifically members of the Disciples of Christ denomination, can struggle together over some difficult issues. We shall see if I hold true to form as the one who steps over the line and offends others.

My sermon is entitled “A Rejection of Christian Terrorism” and each one of these words is loaded and difficult; it's a provocative title on purpose. I chose to pick this sermon title because I felt a need to respond to the events that happened last Sunday at Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas. As that congregation prepared to worship God, Dr. George Tiller was gunned down in its foyer. Tiller was a doctor who provided abortions, specifically what many people call “late term abortions.” Presumably, if the suspect in custody is guilty, he murdered Tiller for a lot of different reasons: opposition to abortion, anti-government political ideology and a particular understanding of Christianity. What bothers me the most is that someone could use Christianity as a means to justify shooting another person in a church.

In recent years there has been a lot of rhetoric in regards to Muslims expressed by those outside of the religion. Critics say that because a few kill in the name of Islam all Muslims are therefore terrorists. The fact is that out of the billion-plus Muslims in the world, the radical violent few are just a small minority. In the same way that I believe it's unfair to judge an entire religion like Islam on the actions of a few, I think that we could all agree, it's unfair to judge Christianity based on what a few violent individuals may do in its name. Nonetheless, I believe that just as Muslims have a responsibility to denounce their own who use religion to justify violence, we as Christians must also denounce those who want to twist our religion to justify violence for whatever purpose. Indeed, there have been many Islamic groups who have spoken out against religious terrorism;¹ they just don't get press coverage about it. I wonder how many Christian pulpits this morning will bother to publicly reject a Christianity that believes it is okay to kill someone else at church? If we reject a theology of hatred and violence coming from

madrassas in rural Pakistan, then we should also reject theologies of hatred and violence coming from the pulpits of American churches.

I have no illusions that what I say this morning in this congregation is going to change our world. I debated about whether saying anything at all about such a contentious issue like abortion was worth it—even if a murder in a church was the entry point to talking about it, but I felt to say nothing was to imply that whatever happened last Sunday was, if not justified, not the worst thing in the world. For me, the issue is less about the morality of abortion and more about its complexity. Furthermore, I wish to argue that it is never justifiable to ignore these complexities and arrive at a place so bereft of nuance that murder is justified.

First of all, there's the difficult subject of abortion itself. As much as I believe the debate in America is out there still going strong, I also believe it is governed by people at the extremes. I think the media does a really lousy job of talking about what's in the middle between one extreme and the other. What is left out in the debate and the coverage of it are the many heart-wrenching decisions made by women and their families every day. To remain at one extreme or the other is to ignore the human tragedies in the middle.

On one hand there are those who would say that a woman has a right to choose and that a fetus is only tissue inside a woman's womb, but medical ethicists all pretty much agree that at least at some point or another when that fetus can survive outside of the womb, it begins to be alive. Even before that point, there is the complex issue of the fetus at least offering the potential for life.² I myself am the father of two children who were adopted at birth. They were birthed by women who chose not to have abortions. Whether my sons were truly alive or only possessing the potential for life when they were in their mothers' wombs seems immaterial to me when I consider that they did indeed come out of those wombs to a life with Jennifer and I. The thought of them not being alive is a difficult one for me to think about. To operate from the perspective that the life of a baby or at least the potential for it is irrelevant to the abortion debate is to close one's eyes to the realities of life

On the other hand, there are those who would say that life begins at conception and that anything that happens to end a pregnancy from that point on is destroying a human life. In reality this is not a medical statement—even though many people would like to believe it is; it's actually a theological statement. Ethicists and medical professionals in general--from a strictly medical philosophical perspective--say across the board that a fetus is alive when it reaches a certain point of lung development or perhaps neural development in the brain. From this point of view, there is a qualitative difference between a fetus in the first trimester versus the third trimester.³ If a doctor, medical ethicist or anyone else wishes to believe life begins at conception, they do so as a matter of faith not science.

I began thinking about how the claim that life begins at conception is a statement of faith rather than scientific fact when I read our own denomination's statement about abortion. They are, of course, as all statements are in our denomination, not binding upon our local church nor binding upon the individuals that make them up. It says, the General

Assembly “Respects differences in religious beliefs concerning abortion and oppose, in accord with the principle of religious liberty, any attempt to legislate a specific religious opinion or belief concerning abortion upon all Americans.”⁴ The statement further recognizes that people of good faith can disagree on issues surrounding abortion and it urges compassion upon all people involved in the traumas of “undesired pregnancies.” I believe the statement is a good one.

Within the vast middle ground between the extremes, there are many other issues to be considered when a person or group tries to come to a consensus about abortion. For example, people on all sides of the debate should consider the conditions that may lead a woman to have an abortion in the first place: poverty, particular difficulties in her life situation, her own health, and so on. Also, for millennia, men have tried to control women and their sexuality, so attempts to override a woman’s own decision-making abilities as a free moral agent should always be met with suspicion. There are other factors to consider, such as the statistics that show countries with the strictest laws on abortions not only continue to have high rates of abortion but also the highest numbers of maternal deaths by women who get unregulated and unsafe abortions.⁵ Furthermore, there are those who would in the pursuit of a pro-life stance oppose the use of contraceptives and advocate the teaching of abstinence. Such stances always befuddle me, because it seems like if you want fewer unplanned pregnancies you should at least want education about and methods of preventing them.

Most of all, as we consider these factors and many more, all involved should first be willing to listen to the voices of women for whom abortion is not an academic exercise. We should listen to the women who grieve, because they believe the abortions they’ve had were wrong. We should also listen to the women who declare that although their decisions to have abortions were painful, it was the right choice for them and their families.

I e-mailed a friend of mine this week and mentioned that I would be preaching about the murder of George Tiller and the issues surrounding abortion. He replied back and shared with me about his experience being a chaplain at a hospital in Florida. He related sitting with several families who found out they had babies *in utero* with horrific deformities and abnormalities or with conditions that would pretty much guarantee they would die soon after birth. Those families struggled over whether to end those pregnancies, which some did, or to carry them to term, which others did. He said, “What I would encourage you to share with your congregation is the ambiguity of life and of birth and how as much as we might want things to fit into neat categories, of this is when life begins, or that is where life begins, or in all circumstances this is okay, or in all circumstances that must be the right way to go, life is so often very difficult and perplexing.”

We, in our effort to be Christ-like to those who are hurting, need to do more listening than talking; we need to be considering the exceptions, as well as what may happen most of the time. We have to consider all of the different ways that lives are affected and we also need to respect women in their own right. Doing all these things is no easy task; I don’t have a particularly clear way forward to recommend to you. I recognize that

statement alone could be offensive to many of you who feel there is a clear way forward on issues surrounding abortion. What I feel very clear about is that we as Christians whether in dealing with this issue of abortion or any other issue, need to be very careful in how we describe and relate to people we disagree with.

Frank Schaeffer is a writer and the son of Frances Schaeffer, one of the architects of the Religious Right. He came from England and helped establish what happened in the 1980's and is considered, even after his death, to be a preeminent thinker in evangelical Christian thought. His son Frank as an adult has renounced if not the beliefs, the tactics that were used by both his father and himself. He wrote an apology this week after hearing of Dr. Tiller's death, he confessed his own complicity in the murder, because of his work for the Religious Right and said, "I -- and the people I worked with in the religious right, the Republican Party, the pro-life movement and the Roman Catholic Church, all contributed to this killing by our foolish and incendiary words." He related how one of his father's books sold over a million copies and in it equated America and its legalized abortion to Hitler's Germany. The book went on to say that "whatever tactics would have been morally justified in removing Hitler would be justified in trying to stop abortion." In a book of his own, Schaeffer said much the same. Schaeffer and his father both thought no one would take their inflammatory words literally, but as Schaeffer notes, "The people who stir up the fringe never take responsibility."⁶ This week, at least the younger Schaeffer took responsibility for his part in laying the groundwork for a violent individual to act.

It's no wonder when there is an entire industry of books, videos, dvd's, a political machine lobbying Congress and sending out millions of pieces of direct mail, and a religious network galvanizing the faithful--all reducing the complex issues surrounding abortion to a simple equation of abortion equals murder, that there will inevitably be some extremists who will take that language and see it as their duty on behalf of God to destroy what they consider to be evil. Apparently that happened last week as it has happened several times before. We are left as Christians to point out that on an issue this complex such language is not appropriate and does not demonstrate love. To denounce people in this way, to declare them evil in regards to an issue so complex, is to inevitably prepare the way for violence to be done in our religion's name.

What's the point of talking about this? Why even do it in our church, where I think that we could all reasonably agree that no matter how we may feel about abortion, we could unanimously denounce the killing of a doctor who performed them? I don't expect any of you to get your automatic weapons and go kill someone, but I do think each one of us has opinions and influence in our society. By not speaking out, we run the risk of coming across as indifferent or even somewhat approving of the death of a doctor who provided abortions. It matters a great deal how Christians are perceived in the world. The church already has a bad enough name out there and it only gets worse if we say nothing.

Another friend of mine, who lives in Knoxville, Tennessee corresponded with me about today's sermon. She's no longer a Christian for many reasons, but among them is that her impression of the church is one that propagates hatred. For her and many others,

Christianity in our culture boils down complex problems into simplistic answers and then demonizes and destroys people who disagree with them. Although she's not practicing any form of religion anymore, she has a number of good friends who go to the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Knoxville. This is the church where a gunman walked in last year during a children's choir concert and began shooting people. Later he confessed that he killed the people in that church because he hated liberals. She shared with me that although she doesn't think of herself as a paranoid person, lately she's been feeling that all of Christendom is out to get people like her.

The killing of Dr. Tiller last week and the killings of the members of the UUA congregation in Tennessee last year represent people from one extreme attacking people who disagree with them. To my knowledge, violence from the other extreme has not happened in a similar way, but it could. Whenever those at one extreme position or another choose to decry the basic humanity of those with whom they disagree, violence could very well result. Whether it's Frances Schaffer saying abortion is a holocaust and God will damn America, or its Jeremiah Wright coming from the left saying God will damn America for its militarism, both speakers place themselves upon the throne of God to cast judgment of life and death upon others.

My friend in Knoxville, who's no longer a Christian said, "I don't go to church. I don't even believe in God anymore, but I would like to hear your sermon. It makes me feel better to know that there is a least one minister and one church where they're denouncing this type of violence and recognize the difficulty of these complex questions".

So, I say to you, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."
Amen

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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

¹ For a helpful list of Muslim statements against terrorism, see the website of Charles Kurzman, professor at the University of North Carolina: <http://www.unc.edu/~kurzman/terror.htm>.

² See Paul Simmons' helpful discussion of the difference between "potentialities and actualities" in his article "Personhood, the Bible and the Abortion Debate," in *Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice Educational Series No. 3* on the RCRC web site: <http://www.unc.edu/~kurzman/terror.htm>.

³ Simmons notes, "Logically, for instance, no one can deny the continuum from fertilization to maturity and adulthood; however, not every step on the continuum has the same value or constitutes the same entity."

⁴ The full text can be read on-line at the Disciples for Choice web site: <http://www.disciplesforchoice.org/> and at the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice web site: http://www.rcrc.org/we_affirm.html.

⁵ For a helpful discussion of these statistics, see the interview with Michelle Goldberg, author of *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, And The Future of the World*, on the NPR program *Fresh Air With Terry Gross*: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103022290>

⁶ The quotations in this paragraph come from Schaeffer's June 1, 2009 blog post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-schaeffer/how-i-and-other-pro-life_b_209747.html.