

NOW MORE THAN EVER

Rampant religious tribalism calls for a response.

BY THE REV. GREGORY FLINT

EDITOR'S NOTE: Religious ideology played a defining role in the outcome of the November General Election, both at the national level with the election of George W. Bush, and at the state level with the passage of Measure 36 banning same-sex marriage. Minister Gregory Flint of Eugene's First Congregational Church, UCC, gave this sermon the Sunday following the election. It is reprinted with permission. Flint's past sermons are online at www.fcceugene.org

One belief more than any other is responsible for so much division in the world and bloodshed. It is the belief that those who do not share my faith, do not really share my humanity. That those who believe differently, or call God by a different name, or don't read a sacred text the same way I do — must be the unsaved who stand outside the circle of true believers.

And this ancient tendency toward making religion exclusive and tribal remains the biggest challenge of this still young 21st century. For so much of the hatred and oppression and terror in the world finds language and symbol and justification in zealous religion.



THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT 1851-53

Religion, all religion, is about identity — who we are and what we believe. But for every religious “we” there is the temptation to point to a “they” — those who don't believe what we believe; those who don't share our religious values and thus are assumed to have no values; those who live outside our religious comfort zone; the “others” whose truth is not our truth.

This inherent tendency of religion to become tribal goes all the way back. Ancient peoples lived in tribes. And each tribe had its own god or cadre of gods who watched over the tribe's destiny and helped them defeat their enemies.

You can see this in certain texts of the Bible for sure: those that say God has his home on our sacred mountain; inhabits our local shrine; loves us above all people; and will empower us to defeat those not like us. For our God is greater than their god.

How often human history runs red with blood shed in the name of God.

Oh, violence in the world is not simply and only about religion. There are always other historical, political, social, and economic factors. But part of what always fuels the fire is truth claims about God that also demonize those whose religious beliefs are different.

There is a rising crescendo, all over the world and in this country, of religious extremism in Christianity and every other religion as well. We thought that with the Enlightenment, the rise of modern science and research, more education, and globalization, that we would outgrow these old religious tribalisms. Instead, religious conflict has increased the world over. It has been the big and awful surprise of the 21st century.

We must now, here, more than ever before, be so intentional about teaching and modeling for our children a different way of being religious. Religion for us here must be about spiritual imagination, generosity, open-mindedness, compassion, inclusion, thoughtfulness and tolerance. Tolerance not as indifference, but as a learning process in which we allow ourselves to be enlarged, not threatened, by religious difference.

We must, we absolutely must creatively, clearly, and courageously address all expressions of tribalized religion. The world our children will inherit depends on it.

Tribalized religion is what Jesus challenged over and over. It is what he confronted in this morning's text with the Sadducees.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees were competing religious parties and power groups at cultural war with each other. And though Jesus had conflict with both, the Pharisees were the more liberal of the two in terms of scripture. For the Pharisees looked not just to the literal word of a text, but to the interpretations of the words by the learned teachers.

Not so the Sadducees. They counted as scripture only the first five books. So if it wasn't literally in Genesis through Deuteronomy, it wasn't of God. We would call the Sadducees fundamentalists, I suppose.

And one of the big issues that divided Sadducee from Pharisee was belief in resurrection. Because there is no reference to an after-life in the first five books, the Sadducees did not believe in it and could not tolerate anyone who did.

So they come to Jesus with this cynical question about marriage in heaven. Cynical because they don't believe in any kind of

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And we must somehow find ways to deal with this. We must do what we can here in this house.

heaven in the first place, but they pose this hypothetical: If a childless man dies and his brother takes the widow in marriage, and then this second brother dies, and the widow is passed on to the third brother, and

A Progressive Church?

EUGENE'S FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH is one of many congregations that have adopted “The Eight Points of the Center for Progressive Christianity.”

The code includes statements of tolerance and inclusion, such as recognizing “the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the gateway to God's realm,” and welcoming a list of “all sorts and conditions of people.” Included are “believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, homosexuals and heterosexuals, females and males, the despairing and the hopeful, those of all races and cultures, and those of all classes and abilities, without imposing on them the necessity of becoming like us.”

The code also proclaims that “the way we treat one another and other people is more important than the way we express our beliefs . . . (we) find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.”