

“Fundamental Clarity”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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As a relatively new resident to the city of Greensboro, every time I read the newspaper or listen to the radio, or otherwise engage with the public square, I am consistently surprised at all of the wonderful opportunities that our city has to offer. The Wyndham Golf Tournament, the upcoming National Folk Festival, and the International Civil Rights Center are just three of the wonderful offerings that Greensboro has for its citizens and visitors.

Another surprising offering of Greensboro is its “One City, One Book” program, in which every other year all the citizens of Greensboro are encouraged to read the same book and then engage on lively programs of discussion about the book. The book selected this year was Bill Bryson’s 1998 classic called “A Walk in the Woods”. It is about his experience of hiking at least part of the Appalachian Trail. The book, which I have read, is a wonderful, funny and deeply informative book about the Appalachian Trail. The only drawback of the book is that Bill Bryson actually never finished the Appalachian Trail, so it was no surprise when I was out on the Appalachian Trail this past April that we saw more than one hiker proudly wearing a T-shirt that boldly read “Bill Bryson is a wimp”; nonetheless, “A Walk in the Woods” is well worth the read and a wonderful way to bring together the city.

Books have, until this moment in history, at least, always had the power to capture people’s imaginations and often influence the way they think. This influential power of books and the ideas that are found within books, is no more powerfully illustrated than the life and history of the mainline Protestant church of which we are a part. Whether it is clearly understood by mainline Protestant Christians or not, the thoughts and ideas of a variety of books have brought us to where we are today theologically.

Three books, among many, that have influenced the church in the past 100 years include, first of all, in 1906, Albert Schweitzer’s classic called “Quest for the Historical Jesus” in which Schweitzer argues that Jesus must be understood in the context of late Jewish eschatology which means, in late Jewish history, when Jews felt like the end of the world was at hand. Schweitzer made the argument that Jesus could not be understood without understanding that feeling that something in history was coming to an end.

A second book which spawned a social movement in Protestantism was the 1917 book by Walter Rauschenbusch called “A Theology for the Social Gospel”. Through this book, and others he published, Rauschenbusch has become known as the father of social gospel movement. This was a movement of the early 20th century in which Christian ethics were applied to social problems such as poverty, inequality, racial relations and the dangers of war.

A third book, which was a book that I was even required to read in seminary in 1996, which had a profound influence on the mainline Protestant church, is a book by H. Richard Niebuhr published in 1951 called “Christ and Culture”. “Christ and Culture” was a survey of the different orientations that the Christian faith can take in regards to culture, so his chapters in this book included “Christ Against Culture”, “Christ of Culture”, “Christ Above Culture”, and where Niebuhr ultimately comes out in this book is the idea of “Christ Transforming Culture”, making culture more like the kingdom of God.

Now, these three books do not, in any way, exhaust the list of books that have impacted the way that modern thinking Protestants envision the faith and the work of the church. There are hundreds of books and, while they are very important books, I lift them up because all of them come out of a wave of historical critical studies that were coming out of Europe in the late 19th and 20th centuries. This was an academic intellectual movement that continues to impact our lives today. These studies that came out of the academies in Europe raised doubts about the historical authenticity of the Bible, and this was the first time in memory where there were questions being raised about the historical accuracy of the Bible. As an academic discipline, the

historical critical model of biblical studies assumed that everything in the Bible that seemed extraordinary or miraculous was to be questioned in terms of its factuality. These stories may have truth to them, but this academic intellectual movement questioned whether these stories should be embraced as rationally possible. This was a time in academic circles of great optimism regarding the human creature and its capabilities. This was before World War I and World War II to be sure. This was a time when Darwin's theory of evolution was all the rage. People were either repulsed by the theory or embraced it with great enthusiasm, and there was a sense that the rational enlightened human mind free from the disoriented myths of the world could lead humanity to a new age of freedom, joy and peace, so there was a sort of swell of enthusiasm by the enlightenment and other academic intellectual movements that humanity was on the cusp of a new moment because of our freed rational informed minds.

All of this rational, enlightened historical, critical thinking was very exciting to many, but at the same time it made some in the Christian community quite nervous. Some theologians and thinkers in the Christian faith reacted to the insights of the historical critical thinkers by arguing that the question of evolution, for example, was only one example of the threat that the new academic and biblical thinking posed to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. They saw this new thinking, this new rationalism, this new enlightenment thinking and became panicked about what it could do to the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

In 1846, a fundamental movement was formed called The Evangelical Alliance which led about 50 years later in 1885 to a meeting in Niagara Falls, New York, where a list of five fundamentals of Christianity was articulated. It was here that Christian fundamentalism had its birth based on these five non-negotiable articles of the faith, so when you hear in our public discussions about fundamentals of a Christian variety, the origins, the genesis moment for that, was this meeting in Niagara Falls. Here were those five fundamentals of that first meeting which have continued to hold water for fundamentalists throughout our 50 years.

The first fundamental was the inerrancy of scripture. This is the idea that the Bible is without error or fault in all of its teachings.

The second fundamental was the divinity of Jesus. This is the concept that Jesus is God, or at least the revelation of God.

The third fundamental was the virgin birth. Jesus was born by a divinely ordained miracle to the virgin Mary.

The fourth fundamental was the idea that Jesus' death on the cross a substitute for our sins. This was the doctrine of the atonement. It is the narrative that informed Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

The fifth fundamental was that Jesus' resurrection was physical and that he would return soon and break back into history.

So, it was at this meeting in Niagara Falls that this five-sided box of fundamentalism was born, and the body of Christ had been torn apart by fundamentalism ever since.

Now, the United Church of Christ, like all mainline Protestant denominations (and mainline Protestant denominations include the American Baptists, not the Southern Baptists, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical in America, the United Church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and the Disciples of Christ, United Methodist Church and some lists include Quakers) have historically been on the forefront of the historical critical wave of scholarship that came out of Europe in the late 1800s. Indeed, all of our major seminaries, thus most of our clergy, have largely been shaped by the historical critical model of biblical scholarship. We are, as we like to say in the UCC, called to love God with our minds.

That made me start thinking about Peace Church. I did a little historical research in terms of Peace United Church of Christ. Indeed, Peace Church, in its 112-year history, has had 12 full-time pastors, all of whom

have come out of our four seminaries that are related to the United Church of Christ. You may or may not know that four pastors of Peace United Church of Christ, including me, have come out of Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis—me, Hoyt Fesperman, William Lyerly and Harvey Fesperman. One of your pastors at Peace Church came out of Harvard Divinity School. That was Bruce Havens. One of your pastors came out of Duke Divinity School. That was Walter Patton. Six of your pastors came out of Lancaster Theological Seminary which included John Dieterly, Mel Palmer, Joshua Levins, Frank Lefavre, Abraham Wolfinger and Shuford Peeler.

When I looked at the profile of Peace Church during my search, it was not surprising to see all the support, both financially and in terms of volunteer hours, for social ministries because all of your pastors here at Peace Church have been influenced and impacted in powerful ways by the social gospel movement and the historical critical nature of biblical scholarship. Consciously or not, the social gospel has been the motivating theological orientation of this church for all of its 112 years.

The struggle between fundamental Christianity that came out of Niagara Falls, and the historical critical model of mainline Christianity that has its origins in Europe has taken on a new urgency in American culture, a culture that has changed dramatically in the past 50 years. As the culture war in America has continued to fester and grow, it has washed over into our understandings of the Christian faith.

If you read the newspaper yesterday, you will see that this argument, this historical fundamental and historical critical argument, is now impacting the Quakers of North Carolina.

The culture war in America has threatened the Christian faith and, as we see it decline, our tendency is to feel more threatened, and when a faith tradition is perceived as threatened, the reaction is almost always to tighten up the boundaries of who is in and who is out, and this tightening up of boundaries, of defining the faith according to some hard and non-negotiable fundamentals has left us with at least two important questions.

The main question that faces all churches today is, is Christian faith about correct beliefs or is it about embodiment or, in other words, how we live, so is Christian faith about what we believe or what we live. That is one of the great questions that face all of our churches today. I had to say this, but I often encounter those little traps, those biblical traps. They are often put on men's urinals. You know, they've got you right there! When you read those traps, they are typically about those fundamentals, and if you believe those five, you are going to get into heaven.

That is one of our questions for Peace Church. Is our faith fundamentally about beliefs and getting your beliefs right, or is it primarily about embodiment of gospel ethics?

The second critical question tied closely to this first question is the question of salvation. Salvation is defined as "the deliverance from sin and its consequences". Salvation in the Christian tradition is, how do we free ourselves up from the powers of death in our world, the powers of sin? The question again is, is salvation, and other worldly reward for faith in Christ, about getting sort of into heaven or getting eternal life granted to us, or is salvation an earthbound reality that comes with the building of God's kingdom here on earth. In that sense, salvation is about powers of that work here in our lives and our workplaces and in our community. Salvation is creating a different order so that those powers of death cannot have control over our lives.

How the Christian church answers these questions is critically important. As I mentioned, I read that newspaper article yesterday about the Quakers, and I said, there they are, struggling with this question like all of us are struggling with this question. These are the questions that dangle in the air for us and that awake our response and we trust that, in confronting these questions and struggling with these questions, God is with us to help us come to a resolution and answers about how we live our faith, and we give thanks to God for those challenging questions that are always before us. Amen.