

**“Faith in Our Modern World”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 5, 2014**

In the spring of 1996, I was in the final stretch of my seminary education. I had passed all of the tests, I had read all the books, I had survived my internships, and I had somehow gotten through my oral exams. I had three classes left and I could barely stand it. One of those three classes I had left was a class called Missiology. That is the history and theory of Christian mission. How boring can you get, I thought, and it was being taught by a professor who was not even full time. He was a guest lecturer. This class, I was certain, was going to be like having a root canal. It would be slow and painful, yet something happened in that class that made me sit up in my chair.

After the usual introduction, after the distribution of the class syllabus and an explanation of the requirements for the class, Dr. Norm Jackson lifted up a book and said “This book is not required reading for this class, but for those of you who will be going out into the world of ministry soon, you sure as hell better read it”. With that, he put the book down and never mentioned it again. The book was entitled “Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy”, written by Benjamin Barber in 1996. The book turned out to be prophetic in its vision of the future and highly stimulating and controversial in its analysis.

For those of us in our final weeks of seminary education, the thought of yet another book to read (this one not even required) was too much to even consider, but I (being a fairly motivated student at that point in my life) had tremendous respect for Dr. Jackson. I went and bought the book, thinking to myself that I will read it when I can find the time. Well...on September 11, 2001, I found the time because, as you remember well, on that day Jihad invaded McWorld.

For the past 13 years, America has been engaged in a seemingly never-ending struggle with Islamic terrorists. We have sacrificed military and civilian personnel. We have spent unimaginable amounts of our national treasury. We have turned our nation into a society of surveillance and fear, and yet we are bombing another Middle Eastern country. This time we are teaming up with nations and groups that, in other circumstances, we might consider enemies. We are scared because we have been told to be scared because there is good reason to be scared. Most of the time, our response to Jihad vs. McWorld is simply to react—to react in fear, and rarely do we ever think rationally about what is going on, but it is time to start thinking about it.

Benjamin Barber argues that what is going on in our current struggle with militant Islam is not primarily a religious problem, but it is, he says, at its core, a struggle which involves global western consumer capitalism, modernity and power of the free market, and a Middle Eastern response of religious and tribal fundamentalism. What Barber says on the one hand is that, since the 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of our bipolar world, consumer capitalism on a global level has been rapidly dissolving social and economic barriers between nations and transforming the world’s diverse populations into a blandly uniform market to be exploited. On the other hand, ethnic, religious and racial hatreds have been fragmenting the political landscape into smaller and smaller tribal units with the perception that modern global capitalism and its values are a threat to local cultures which enflames tribal units to strike out at western powers which they see as invasive and demonic.

Where all of this more directly intersects with our lives as people of faith is that one component we are struggling with is the phenomenon of fundamentalism. The western media tends, at

times, to portray fundamentalism as a purely Islamic phenomenon. Fundamentalism is, in fact, a global reality that can be found in every major faith tradition in the world. There are fundamentalist Jews, fundamentalist Christians, fundamentalist Hindus, fundamentalist Buddhists, and so on. Fundamentalism is, at its core, the demand for a strict adherence to orthodox theological doctrines, the fundamentals of the faith, regardless of what faith tradition you are part of.

Strangely enough, fundamentalism as a religious phenomenon was first articulated by Protestant Christians in the early part of the 20th century here in America . Protestant fundamentalism includes first the literal interpretation of the Bible as God's word and Jesus as the only way to God. It includes the belief of the virgin birth of Jesus and includes the belief of Christ's death as atonement for the sin of believers. It includes the belief in bodily resurrection of Jesus, and it includes the belief in the literal interpretation of the miracles of Jesus.

The fact that fundamentalism got its start in America makes complete sense because fundamentalism is primarily a response to the problems, disappointments and threats of modernity, and America has always been, and continues to be, the showcase nation of modernity.

Fundamentalism, as a broader religious movement, that is beyond just its Christian expression, includes a variety of characteristics that we need to pay attention to. All fundamentalist movements, regardless of their faith traditions, have a deep fear and suspicion that secular institutions and governments are going to wipe their religion out. So, if you hear the fundamentalist voice in our culture panicking about school prayer and other issues of civil religion, what we are dealing with here is the fear that secular institutions are going to wipe Christianity out in America . All fundamentalist movements look back to a golden age, prior to the onslaught of modernity when everything was okay. If we could only get back to that time!

Fundamentalists have a strong sense of in-group and out-group distinctions, so in Christianity there are the saved and the unsaved. In Islam, there are the faithful and the infidels, and part of this includes a strong emphasis of purity, beliefs and behaviors and the rejection of diversity of opinions; thus, fundamentalists are highly critical of democracy and secularism, even here in the United States because the hallmarks of modern culture include the liberalizing of sexual ethics and the emancipation of women. Fundamentalists believe that women, be they Christian or Islamic, should be impurposed or back in the kitchen. Finally, fundamentalists almost always feel assaulted by the modern establishments and institutions and, as a result, their views become more extreme.

After the famous Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925 in Dayton , Tennessee , when Protestant fundamentalists tried to prevent teaching of evolution in public schools, they were so fooled by the secular press that their theology became even more militant and reactionary. Our modern example of that is ISIS , and we are dealing with that now.

So, what fundamentalism reveals is a fissure in society. It is a great tension we have between those who enjoy and benefit from secular culture and those who see it as a threat.

Now, I doubt you have heard this latest bit of news, but this past week 126 Muslim scholars from around the world signed a 22-page letter, written in Arabic and heavy with quotes from the Quran, denouncing ISIS and the militants who support such groups. They wrote in this letter "You have misinterpreted Islam into a religion of harshness, brutality, torture and murder. This is a great wrong and an offense to Islam, to Muslims and to the entire world". It is a statement that many people around the world were glad to see.

I believe that militant fundamentalist Islam is a great threat to us as Christians, but not in the sense that we will be beheaded, or attacked or converted at the point of a gun, but the great

threat of militant Islam to us is that we will, in our fear and our hatred, cease to be Christians. It is getting hold of people. As followers of Jesus we, too, have scriptures that we can go to in order to justify the slaughter of innocence.

That text I read, Deuteronomy 20, is about the practice of Charam. In Hebrew “Charam” means “to utterly destroy or exterminate”. The term refers to the religious requirement that everything that Israel captures or gains in war, whether that be earthly treasures, animals or human beings, is to be utterly destroyed and offered up to God. These are the sentiments—whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic—of a tribal God and a tribal ancient people, but we are no longer tribal, and we are no longer ancient. We are modern, intelligent and rational people who know, at least intellectually, that God is love and that Jesus came to teach us the way of peace, so let us not be goaded into becoming the evil that we hate because when we see a beheading on You Tube. That is an act of trying to goad us deeper into this struggle, and it is a struggle of violence against violence, but we are not those people, and I believe that the struggle of Jihad vs. McWorld will pass. It WILL pass, but the question is, in the process of it passing, what will we become as a people, as a nation, as a faith tradition. What will we become? Will we all just become monsters of violence? Will we just become perverse reflections of the evil that we hate, or will we follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace?

When you read about the history of Jesus in the first century in Palestine , there was lots of terror there also, and Jesus walked right into the middle of the terror and said we can't do it like this. We can't live like this. We are just going to kill each other. There is a better way to live, and that is what Jesus is all about. So, there is great, great gain in our world at this very moment, and the danger is that we all just become like each other—violent, sadistic and without God.

Jesus invited us to live differently, and it is hard to live as Jesus has invited us to live, but it is the call, and while much of the struggle that goes on in the world is really out of our control, what we can do is pray—pray for peace, pray for new ways to solve our problems, pray for Muslims who have distorted the Islamic faith beyond comprehension. The few Muslim friends I know and have are pained by what they see people doing in the name of Islam. We can pray for peace. We can pray for our brothers and sisters who are Muslim. We can pray for God to intervene and give us new ways to solve our problems. We can pray for our own spirits, that we can truly walk in the footsteps of Jesus. Love your neighbor. Forgive those who violate you. Be faithful to God. We are challenged at this moment. Let us be strong. Thanks be to God. Amen.