

Let's Give Up Religion
John 11:1-50
Lent 5A

March 9, 2008

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Friends:

We are a religious-conscious world. The cover of this month's Atlantic magazine says "Which Religion Will Win?" and details the fight between Christians and Muslims on the continent of Africa. Closer to home, we are a religious conscious nation. For better and more often for worse, we are regularly reminded of religion every day by the media, the President, radio talk show hosts and politicians. So I want to propose we give up religion. Why?

Well, take for example, a photo of Barack Obama in Somali garb which appeared in the media last week. It created an uproar and questions over Obama's religious preference. He is Christian, though some want to say he's Muslim. About the same time last week, a right-wing radio talk show made prominent use of Obama's middle name. It's Hussein. This fueled another firestorm over religion.

As we go deeper into the presidential campaign, it looks like religion will continue to be a divisive and controversial dimension.

When it comes to our president and religion, the debate seems to have been going on for generations. Today, according to some polls, American voters would never elect a Muslim or a Mormon. Since religious affiliation can play an important role in American politics, wouldn't it be great if our next president practices the same religion as great presidents in history – such as Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson?

Uh, anyone know what those guys' religions were?

The White House biography of Lincoln's speeches record mention of God, but doesn't list a religion for him. Scholars note he had no specific religion. Gee, how ever did he get elected?

Thomas Jefferson is officially listed as a deist (meaning he believed God created the universe and then abandoned it, assuming no control or influence over life). President Jefferson discounted all miracles in the Bible. After being accused an atheist, Jefferson wrote "I'm a sect by myself."

Wow. Does that sound like a candidate could go far in the current campaign. Could a candidate who steps outside of Christian circles today beat Obama, Clinton or McCain?

No matter what your stance on the campaign, your candidate of choice, or your opinion on the role of religion in it all – the fact is that religion is once again taking it on the chin. But when you think about it, throughout time religion has been controversial.

Some years back an informal survey was done with college students by a Lutheran pastor and writer in the Twin Cities. The teacher asked the students to give one-word descriptions of religion. Every single response was negative, None were positive – and most of the negative words describing religion were associated with conflict.

Maybe the truth is that religion is full of conflict. Just about anywhere you look, all around the world, religions are in conflict, Experts say it may continue forever. Religious hatreds often run deeper than faith.

Why is there so often, no tolerance, much less love between religious people? Why, if religion is our expression of belief in God, is it so often times cruel, vicious and divisive? Why has

religion been the genesis of wars throughout human history?

There's a story that comedian Emo Philips tells about two Baptists. I'm not singling out Baptists -- we could substitute Lutherans for Baptists in the story.

Before I tell you the story there is one word you need to know to get a chuckle -- and it's the word "heretic." To be called a heretic is not a compliment! A "heretic" is a person who holds an opinion or belief about religion that doesn't conform to accepted teachings.

Phillips says: "I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said "Stop! don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well...are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too!"

Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too!"

Are you Baptist church of God or Baptist church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist church of god!"

I said, "Me too!"

Are you original Baptist church of God, or are you reformed Baptist church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist church of God!"

I said, "Die heretic" and pushed him off the bridge.

Phillip's story is not too far off the mark, nor is it limited to Baptists. As we all know, some of us from firsthand experience, religion very often divides people and families or closes them off from one another. Lutherans and Roman Catholics for years fostered mistrust for each other. Today some still hold their religion to be the only holy or true religion. But I ask you, why does religion have these negative effects? Why does it divide us?

I think I'd like to venture an answer to that question. The problem with religion comes when we think we have all the answers -- and that our way is the right way. And the rub comes when someone else believes there is another way and we cannot tolerate the differences. When we refuse to be open to new ideas, new learning and begin to channel our energies into preserving the status quo -- then it is that religion becomes a curse.

This was the situation of the Pharisees in the bible reading today. The Pharisees were put-out by Jesus and his work of bringing Lazarus back from the dead. In doing this, Jesus created a bind for the religious people who could not see beyond their religion.

Now, these Pharisees who got angry with Jesus were good and proper religious people. They had in their heritage, all the richness and vibrancy of Jewish religious experience. They wanted to uphold and preserve that tradition. But that tradition had become cramping and deadly.

You don't have to read far in the Bible to feel the tension and disgust religious people had

for Jesus. I think the religious people of that day would have been happier if Jesus had never appeared on the scene. I can almost hear the Pharisees saying, *"What are we to you, Jesus? Mind your own business, Jesus. Just leave and let us get back to our good old religion. We don't need you or your new ways of doing things!"*

Are people still saying that today? You bet. Religion can get in the way of our believing and following Jesus Christ. Religion has said over the years that people who didn't conform to certain beliefs or rules aren't welcome. Religion has said that people who don't believe in prescribed ways are wrong or bad.

Good old religion has said that sexuality is bad, and so are working mothers and the divorced. Good old religion has said that Christianity is really about not drinking or dancing. Good old religion has said only men can be head of the household. Good old religion has held women back for centuries, withholding the office of pastor or priest from them – as if they are less gifted and capable in the eyes of God. And for the people who didn't fit these understandings of Christianity, good old religion was all too eager and all too quick to say, "Die, heretic."

The religious establishment as portrayed in the Bible would have loved it. And that's the thing about good old religion: it always tends to be closed and the same.

So do we want new religion? Jesus did not come to bring a new religion to this earth. Jesus put an end to religion as the Bible makes clear.

You see, the problem -- the whole point with religion is that you have to do something. With religion you have to make sacrifices or you have to use ancient forms of worship. With religion you have to eat fish on Fridays or you are not to use birth control or have women subservient to men. All religions are about doing something so that God will change God's mind about us.

The problem with all religions is that they assume that God really doesn't like us very much. Religions assume that God is full of demands and anger and needs to be bought off or pacified.

Jesus' teaching, on the other hand, is radically different. Jesus said that God didn't need to be bought off. Jesus said that God is a God of mercy, and acceptance, and new hope, and fresh starts. No wonder the religious establishment reacted so strongly to Jesus. Jesus proclaimed the end of religion and a new way of living as believing, faithful people.

A student once as a learned theologian (Karl Barth) if God was revealed in any other religion besides Christianity. The response: *"No, God has not been revealed in any religion, including Christianity. God has been revealed in Jesus!"*

That, my friends, is most important!

We do not gather at Trinity on Sunday morning as members of the Christian religion. We gather as the community of Jesus Christ to share new life in the Savior. And that means that we gather to celebrate salvation, not religion.

The word "religion" comes from a Latin word that means, "To tie, to fasten, bind."

The word "salvation" comes from a word that means "to become large, open, liberated." Jesus, in today's bible reading opened up the grave and Lazarus came back to life. But the salvation Jesus brought about went far beyond getting a dead man breathing again. Jesus opened up to all people the goodness of God.

The community of Jesus is about salvation. It is not closed, but open.

The community of Jesus Christ lives out of forgiveness, not guilt. Religion has heaped enough guilt on people to last until the end of time.

The community of Jesus Christ is characterized not by laws and rules, but by love and hope and faith.

The community of Jesus Christ is not about religion, but salvation.

I believe the community of Jesus Christ is crucial for your life right now. It is for me.

The community of Jesus Christ can transform how you think and how you treat the people in your life with love and kindness, tolerance and respect.

I know the community of Jesus Christ will continue -- as for religion? Well, you can figure that out for yourself. For the rest of our lives, let's celebrate and share widely the community of Jesus Christ. Amen.