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## Brief Sermons on Controversial Topics

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# Sermons on Controversial Topic

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

## Table of Contents

Sermon on Abortion .....	3
Sermon on the Trinity .....	6
Sermon on Chronological Time and Eternal Life .....	9
Sermon on the Truth of John's Gospel and the Validity of World Religion.....	12
Sermon on the Bible and World Religion .....	15
Sermon on Being Spiritual and Religious.....	18
Sermon on Hell .....	21
Sermon on Heaven.....	24

## Sermon on Abortion

Today I will not preach on the lessons but on a topic of urgent importance to our nation: abortion.

The controversy over abortion is ripping the United States apart. We constantly hear extreme and even bitter statements on both sides of the debate. One side shouts abortion is “murder.” The other side shouts that a woman has an absolute right to control her own body. Meanwhile, the political divisions have become daunting. So-called red states are busy enacting laws to put in prison any physician who performs an abortion. In response, so-called blue states are enacting legislation to guarantee the right to an abortion and are stockpiling abortion pills. And the political tactics have become alarming. Our own governor personally paid to have billboards in red states with the caption: “Need an abortion? California is here to help.”

It is essential at this point to do three things: First, we must all understand why the other side (whatever side that is) thinks the way it does, and at least honor its consistency if it is in fact consistent. Second, we must all examine whether the most extreme statements on either side are coherent, and if they are not, reject them. Third, we must search for common ground on abortion. In most of this sermon I will deal with these three points. However, I will conclude the sermon with a harsh condemnation. So buckle up, because we will end with a car crash.

Before proceeding, let me give a word of assurance to anyone who may violently disagree with what I am about to say. This sermon will be mercifully brief, and you will not have to suffer long. I am only a guest preacher. You can serenely return to St. Francis next Sunday secure in the knowledge that I will not be here.

Let us now try to understand why the other side (whatever side that is) thinks the way it does and whether we can at least see that its position is logical. There are two legitimate ways of thinking logically, and they lead to opposite conclusions about abortion: There is the black-and-white way of thinking, and this tends to lead to the conclusion that abortion is wrong; and there is the hundred-shades-of-gray way of thinking, and this tends to lead to the conclusion that an early abortion (and most abortions are early) is fine. According to the black-and-white way of thinking, a fetus is either human or it is not. There is no middle ground. Of course, killing a human being is evil, and killing millions of humans is unspeakably so. Obviously, the only way to avoid such grave evil is not to abort any fetus that might conceivably be human or even become so. The inevitable conclusion is that abortion from the moment of conception is wrong. By contrast, according to the hundred-shades-of-gray way of thinking, a fetus

only becomes fully human over nine months, and in the early period the fetus is so far from being fully human that aborting it is harmless. In the moment after conception, the fetus is only a single cell; of course, a single cell cannot be a human being, and there is no moral reason that a mother should not have it aborted. These two different ways of thinking are both logical and consistent, and whichever way you happen to think, you should not accuse the other side of being illogical, let alone being stupid and insincere.

Now on to the question of whether the extreme slogans on either side of the abortion debate are actually consistent and can be fully accepted. So called pro-lifers insist that abortion is always murder and also condemn the “horror of late term abortions.” But if abortion is always murder, why is a late term abortion any more horrible than an early one? If you insist that a late abortion is especially objectionable, you are implicitly conceding that an early abortion is less objectionable and cannot appropriately be labelled murder without qualification. So-called pro-choicers insist that a woman has the absolute right to control her own body. But no such absolute right exists. What we do with our bodies can have severe social consequences and in some cases should be subject to the law. Almost everyone, including pro-choicers, recognize that the use of some drugs is gravely harmful both to the user and to society at large and that no one should have the legal right to take, for example, heroin.

Let's go on to the topic of whether there is common ground between so-called conservatives and so-called liberals on abortion, and I believe that there is plenty. Both conservatives and liberals are anxious to reduce the number of abortions; these factions merely have different ways of attempting to do so. Pro-lifers wish to reduce the number of abortions by using the force of public education and law. They advocate requiring public schools to teach students that sex outside of marriage is dangerous and that people who perform abortions or have an abortion should be subject to severe legal penalties. By contrast, pro-choicers wish to reduce the number of abortions by making birth control easier to obtain and more affordable so that there will be fewer unwanted pregnancies. Pro-choicers also wish to reduce the number of abortions by providing free child care and monetary grants to families with children so that no woman will have an abortion due to poverty. According to a statistic that I read, two-thirds of women who have abortions are below the poverty line. The conclusion is obvious that many abortions would not occur if the government provided financial assistance so that all pregnant women could afford to have the child. Incidentally, I find it particularly ironic that conservative Roman Catholic bishops want to excommunicate such committed Catholics as President Joe Biden and Speaker Nancy Pelosi. These two political leaders tried to pass legislation which would have provided free childcare and a government grant to families with children. The passage of that legislation would have greatly

reduced the number of abortions. And I believe that if conservative Roman Catholics had supported the legislation that Biden and Pelosi proposed, rather than trying to boot them out of their own Church, the legislation would have passed.

Finally, at least for this portion of the sermon, it is largely possible to be both pro-life and pro-choice, and the Episcopal Church is so. Thus, the Episcopal Church is stridently pro-choice. We have emphasized in resolutions passed by our general convention that people have the right on the basis of individual conscience to have an abortion. The government is not to interfere. “Legislating abortions will not address the root of the problem.” Yet, the Episcopal Church has also insisted that “all human life is sacred from inception to death.” Therefore, abortion should not be used for “birth control, family planning, sex selection, or any reason of mere convenience” but only for the most serious reasons. There are only three cases in which abortion is generally ethically “permissible” (let it be noted, not recommended, but permissible). Abortion is ethically permissible if the pregnancy was not voluntary but due to rape or incest, or if the pregnancy would cause grave, not minor, but grave physical or mental harm to the mother, or the child that would be born would be gravely, not mildly, but gravely physically or mentally damaged. In all other cases, anyone considering an abortion should seek counseling and explore other options, such as completing the pregnancy and having the child raised by someone else, ideally a member of the family. The statements do not define exactly what would qualify as grave harm or grave damage. But I think it is clear that the three general exceptions are at least in some instances fully compatible with a pro-life position. Obviously, it is pro-life to save the life of a mother if completing a pregnancy would be fatal. Obviously, if a child would be born so mentally and physically damaged that it could not have a meaningful life, there is no pro-life objection to an abortion.

Now for the car crash. Some people, especially, some politicians, scream that abortion is murder and should be eliminated by any means possible, even putting physicians in prison. Yet these same people oppose providing free child care and other financial assistance to impoverished, pregnant women. The inevitable result is that many of the women get an abortion. Such political inconsistency is utterly hypocritical; it is also a serious sin.

## **Sermon on the Trinity**

From the Old Testament reading, “So God created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them.

And from the gospel: “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Today we celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity. This is Trinity Sunday in which we emphasize the teaching that there is only one God and yet this one God has three persons, traditionally labelled the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The teaching that there is only one God arose in Israel in Old Testament times. Already in the creation story that begins the Bible we see this one God molding the universe. And the first of the great Ten Commandments of the Old Testament is to worship no other God. Of course, the insistence that there is only one God implies that other cultures worshiped a number of gods, as indeed they did.

Only if there is just one God can there be ultimate order either in the physical universe or in ethics. If we define god as what is ultimate, then if there are many gods there is chaos. And if there is no god, there is chaos also. Many gods means that there are many competing forces in the universe, and there is no one force above them to produce harmony in the physical realm or consistent ethical standards in the moral one. Of course, if there is no god, the result is the same. No one is in charge, and there is nothing holding everything together and nothing to which humankind is ultimately accountable.

We see the consequences of belief in only one God in the biblical story of the creation. God brings order into the cosmos, and the world that God created is fundamentally good. God created humankind in his own image, that is God has shared with us the responsibility in his behalf to further the order and beauty of the natural world and to make everything better.

The belief that this one God nevertheless consists of three persons originated in response to the resurrection of Jesus. Those who encountered the risen Christ, encountered someone who was clearly divine. We see this in the gospel reading. The risen Christ proclaims that all authority in heaven and earth belongs to him. As we saw last Sunday, the risen Christ gives to the Church the Holy Spirit who also is clearly divine. The divinity of the three persons and yet their unity is implied in the baptismal formula. We baptize in the one Name (that is the one reality) of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the doctrine that there is only God who nevertheless exists in three distinct persons is paradoxical and explaining how it can be true has been a continuing challenge in church history, to say nothing of pastoral ministry. Down through the centuries theologians have struggled with explaining the unity and diversity of the Trinity, how just one God can be also three persons. And preachers down through the centuries have struggled to explain to their flocks how to make sense of what was normally called a great mystery.

In my opinion, the best explanation of the Trinity is the one offered by the brilliant theologian, Donald Gelpi, who died some years ago. Gelpi said that the three persons of the Trinity were aboriginal efficacy, obediential efficacy, and the mind of God. God the Father is aboriginal efficacy. In everyday language, someone with aboriginal efficacy is the decider, the person who gives the orders. In the army the commander has aboriginal efficacy; in the classroom, the teacher has. We see God exercising aboriginal efficacy in the creation story. God is the one who says, "Let there be light." By contrast, the Son is obediential efficacy, namely the one who carries out the orders. In the army that would be the troops; in the classroom, that would be the students. The Nicene Creed which we will be reciting in a moment stresses that the Son is obediential efficacy. The Son is the one "through whom all things were made." Finally, the Holy Spirit is the mind of God. The three persons are only One God because they always work together and give themselves to one another completely. The New Testament proclaims that God is love, and the supreme love between the persons allows each of them to relate perfectly to one another and form a community that is totally unified, completely one.

Here is a convincing response to the objection that Jesus prayed to the Father as someone different from himself, and if Jesus is the human life of God, there must be at least two Gods. No. Jesus as the human life of obediential efficacy obeys the Father, the decider, perfectly. There are two persons but only one combined action. Indeed, in John's Gospel Jesus says, "Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise." As the mind of God, the Holy Spirit is involved in all that the Trinity together accomplishes.

An implication of the Trinity is that the primary reality in the universe is not individuality but community, not separateness but integration. God is a perfect community in which all the persons work together without any difficulty. And the universe that the Trinity creates works together. We see this harmony in the creation story. God brings order out of the primordial chaos. Everything gets its proper place, the sea and the land, the sun and the moon, the night and the day, the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals on the land. And because of this harmony, everything is supremely good.



By implication human beings are primarily a community, not individuals. In the creation story God makes both male and female in his image. Of course, man and woman are not identical. And they find their fulfillment in coming together. We should not miss the sexual element in the creation story. All living things, including humans are to be fruitful and multiply. We are called to be in harmony, to work together.

The idea that the primary reality is community, not individuality, is especially challenging to Americans. Historically, the United States has had many strengths, for example, in technological achievement. But we have too much emphasized the individual. We insist on the primacy of the rights of individuals, rather than the need for communal wellbeing. The right of an individual to own an assault weapon takes precedence over the safety of children. This emphasis on individual rights has led to selfishness that has continually undermined the wellbeing of the nation as a whole, and, especially, the wellbeing of the less fortunate. Americans have less concern for the common good than most other cultures. We blame individuals for their faults rather than seeing the communal structures that mold individuals. We fail to realize that real reform must address oppressive social structures, racism, sexism, homophobia, materialism in general that distort individuals and keep us enslaved.

Let us, therefore, remember that the fundamental reality of the universe is the perfect community of the Holy Trinity, that we are called to live up to being made in the divine image by becoming more of a community, and that love takes precedence over the right of individuals to do whatever we please.

## **Sermon on Chronological Time and Eternal Life**

From today's gospel, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

We are all in bondage to chronological time. Chronological time is clock time, and we are slaves to it.

All our lives we have too little clock time. We rush around trying to get things ready for the pre-determined time and often we fail. We are in school and playing sports; we are behind and must score three points to win, and there are only five minutes left in the game. We struggle without success, and the buzzer sounds. The game ends. We lost. We are adults at work and need to get the bid for the contract done by tomorrow. Due to unforeseen circumstances we are behind schedule, and we stay at work until 1:00 AM to get the document completed. But because of fatigue and haste, the document has flaws, and another corporation gets the contract. We are elderly and have a stroke and must get to the hospital within fifteen minutes to prevent severe brain damage. Our spouse summons an ambulance, but it is rush hour and the ambulance takes too long to squeeze through the jammed traffic. By the time we arrive at the hospital, the brain damage has occurred, and we are permanently paralyzed.

Yet, all our lives we also have too much clock time. We have to wait long periods until the previously set time comes. We are in school and hate the teacher, and we have to put up with her for nine miserable months, and each hour seems like a week. We are adults at work and are exhausted and desperately need a vacation, but there is no possibility for one until the summer. We cannot imagine how we will endure until then. We are elderly and in constant pain and need surgery to relieve it. Our health provider puts us on the waiting list and assures us that in just three months we will have the surgery. Meanwhile each day in pain seems to last almost forever.

Another aspect of our slavery to clock time is that we usually can only do one thing well at a time, and the result is that much gets left undone or gets done poorly. We try to multitask, to cook dinner, supervise the children, and watch our favorite TV show simultaneously, but the end result is that we miss most of the show, the children get out of hand, and the dinner is late.

The worst part of our slavery to clock time is that inevitably our time will run out, and we will die. We do not know exactly when our time will run out, but when it does, it will run out forever. Maybe it will be tomorrow; maybe it will be in ten years; maybe we will be extraordinarily fortunate and live to be a hundred and seven. But regardless, our time will run out, and when it runs out it will be

permanently gone. There will be no return from the grave.

Unlike us, God is not subject to clock time; God is eternal. God created time. That implies that God is somehow timeless, somehow not subject to time. Since we humans exist in time and are enslaved to it, we cannot even imagine how anything or anyone can be timeless. But at least we can understand what it means to be everlasting. Everlasting means always was and always will be. So we can at least understand that God always was and always will be.

One implication of God being timeless is that God always has time for us. When we deal with humans, we frequently get reminded that they do not always have time for us. You phone your physician and get a recording to call back during regular office hours unless, of course this is an emergency, and if that is the case, you can go to the hospital emergency room where if you are not lucky you can wait for five hours to be seen. By contrast, when you turn to God in prayer, you never get the response that unfortunately God is not available right now but if you return to prayer sometime between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM central daylight savings time God will be happy to assist you. No, God is there is listen to you now and always.

When you turn to God in prayer you also enter into the mystery of eternal time. This is a subtle point, and we do not always realize that time feels different when we are with God. Awhile back I read that a scientific study found that when people are in meditation, the centers of our brains that locate us in time and space turn off. I myself was once in a meditation session in which the leader first told us to let go of time and then told us to let go of space. Something similar happens in prayer as soon as we do let go and are with God. We lose our sense of time and space. No doubt a scientist would say that the parts of our brains that locate us in time and space have turned off. I would agree that this is true. But I would suggest that the reason that our brains have turned off is that our spiritual selves are no longer in time and space; we are with God who is not subject to them.

Because God is not limited by time and because when we are with God in prayer we are in the eternal, we know that we live forever. Yes, our bodies are subject to time and will die. But our essential selves even in this life can enter into God and leave time and space behind. Therefore, when our bodies do die, our essential selves can go to God where we will no longer be enslaved to clock time. Actually, near-death out-of-body experiences have verified this. People who are clinically dead and then are revived report leaving their bodies and going through a tunnel and meeting their deceased friends and relatives and then being interviewed by “a being of light,” in Christian language, God. People who have out-of-body experiences also report “the transcendence of . . .

spatiotemporal boundaries,” to cite one study. In other words, not subject to space and time.

However, the evangelist John did not need such testimony to know that there was eternal life. The author was himself deeply centered in God and in his own mystical experience dwelt in God and knew that God was eternal. And because John was centered in God, John knew that he himself had eternal life. And John also knew that Jesus was human like himself, and after death Jesus rose from the grave and entered into eternal life. This risen Christ was also available to John through the Spirit. This Christ was eternal and could say in John's Gospel, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” Notice that Christ does not say, “Before Abraham (who lived centuries earlier), I was.” No, “Before Abraham was I AM.” The divine Christ is not limited by time. Hence, John knew that he himself would after death become forever free from clock time. So it is that the evangelist could write the text for this sermon, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

## Sermon on the Truth of John's Gospel and the Validity of World Religion

Two quotes from today's gospel:

First, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Second, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

John's Gospel insists that Jesus is the one incarnation of God and the sole way to salvation. That theme already appears in the opening verses. "The Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us. No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only Son, . . . who has made him known." The claim that Jesus is one incarnation of God and the sole way to salvation also pervades this morning's gospel. We read that Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven, that Jesus will ascend to where he was before, that there is nowhere else to go for salvation because *he* is the Holy One of God.

Nevertheless, for us, as for the audience in today's gospel, the claim that Jesus is the sole way to salvation is difficult. We live in a pluralistic society, and we know good people who are not Christian. Many of us have friends and even relatives who follow other religions, Jewish friends and relatives, Muslim ones, Buddhists, and Hindus. We see that these are sincere people, that their own religious paths work for them. If we talk to them about their religions or if we study these spiritual paths, we see that these religions are in many ways beautiful and profound. And we cannot accept the claim that the people who sincerely follow these paths cannot have salvation. When I was teaching at Dominican University a fellow faculty member who has a beautiful spirit and is a friend once asked me if I as a Christian thought that she was destined for hell. Of course, I said no.

The question of how I could affirm both John's Gospel and the value of other spiritual paths even became a primary professional concern. While I was teaching at Dominican University of California, I gave courses both in John's Gospel and in World Religion and in both classes I had Christian students and non-Christian ones. Naturally, when I taught John's Gospel, I insisted that this was a great book, fully worthy of study even by non-Christians, and when I taught world religions, I insisted on the beauty and depth of each religion that we studied.

But how am I to combine these two very different claims? Well, here is a brief summary of best answer that I can come up with.

In general there are two basic approaches to religion. One approach emphasizes that we already have within us the fullness of Ultimate Reality. What we need to do is know who we already are. Thus, Hinduism insists that Brahman is Atman.

Atman is the soul in each of us and Brahman is the Divine. We are all divine already. We just need to realize it. Buddhism makes the same essential claim without insisting on God. Buddhist monks chant samsara is nirvana. Samsara is the chaos of normal life with its endless reincarnations and the suffering that accompanies them. Nirvana is the eternal peace that we attain when we achieve enlightenment and realize that there is no separate self and that karma guides all things. Once we stop clinging to illusions, we know that there is no essential problem. Similarly, the Sufis insist that there is nothing but God. The other approach to religion insists that there is a gulf between humans and the divine that cannot be fully bridged. Humans are weak, foolish, mortal, and sinful. God alone is almighty, omniscient, eternal, and sinless. What we must do is follow God's leading, and God will bless us. However, we will never become divine. We must be obedient to the laws that God reveals and, if we are, God will reward us either in this life or in a life after death, but we will always be only human, and God will always be infinitely greater. Thus, both Islam and Judaism insist that God has revealed what we must do; we need to follow these rules; and if we do, God will reward us. But the reward does not include becoming divine.

There are problems with both religious approaches. The problem with the claim that we already have within us the fullness of Ultimate Reality is that the claim is incompatible with the radical sin that we see every day. Every time we listen to the news we hear about human depravity, about war, genocide, torture, the sexual exploitation of children. Such grim realities cannot be the product of human beings who already have within them the fullness of Ultimate Reality. By contrast, the problem with the claim that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the Divine and the Human is that this claim does not satisfy human longing and even human experience. We resist the idea that there are limits that we can never surpass, that there is some wall that we can never scale. We long to be fully one with God, and we sense that somehow this is possible. Even when I was a child the thought that I was divine crossed my mind, and I sensed that it was right.

Strange to say, John's Gospel combines both schools of religion. On the one hand, John's Gospel insists on the radical sinfulness of humanity. God sent his Divine Son to show the world God's love; the world responded by torturing that Son to death. In John's Gospel Jesus underlines in the strongest terms the sinfulness of the world and its alienation from God. For example, Jesus tells his disciples, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me . . . Now they have no excuse for their sin." Yet, John's Gospel insists that it is possible for humans to share fully in the divine. Already in the gospel's opening verses, we read, "To all who received him [Jesus] . . . he gave power to become children of God," and later in the gospel Jesus declares that those to whom the Word of God came can even be called "gods."

The reason that John's gospel can emphasize both the radical sinfulness of humanity and that sinful humans can become divine is that in Jesus God himself became a human being and through the incarnation humans gain the power to become divine. By becoming human and even accepting crucifixion, God showed the depth of God's love and gave us an example of ideal human behavior. By becoming human God experienced what we must experience and showed us that he is not asking more from us than he asked of himself. If we accept this divine love and follow the example of God's human life, then the power of God's spirit can allow us to become divine by fully participating in God.

Consequently, I can affirm the greatness of world religion and the truth of John's Gospel. Religions that emphasize the radical difference between humans and God are correct. It is true that humans are weak and sinful and need to be obedient to the divine. Religions like Islam and Judaism are right. Yet it is also true that human beings can become divine. The instinct of religions like Hinduism is correct too. We at least have the longing to become divine and the potential to become so. However, where I prefer John's Gospel is that as radically sinful beings, we must do more than discover who we already are. Instead, we must allow the God who became incarnate to make us a new creation through the power of his extravagant love.

## **Sermon on the Bible and World Religion**

From today's gospel: "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits . . .'"

The Episcopal Church acknowledges the authority of both Scripture and reason. On the one hand, we hold that the Bible is the indispensable source for the primary truth about God. The primary truth about God is monotheistic and incarnational, or to use non-technical language, there is only one God and this God became human in Jesus of Nazareth. The only way that we can know this truth is through the biblical record. It is the Bible, or more specifically, the gospels that tell us about the human being Jesus, his life, teaching, miracles, death, and resurrection. It is through these, especially, the resurrection, which we celebrate in this Easter season that we learn that Jesus is the human life of God. Without the Bible we would know nothing about Jesus. On the other hand, the Episcopal Church also recognizes the authority of reason. To be certain that something is true we must rely on a critical examination of evidence, and all sound and relevant evidence must be taken into consideration. This evidence includes human experience, both personal and communal, and the secular disciplines of the physical and social sciences. Thus, we must consider what we know to be true from our own individual experience, and what we know to be true from the collective experience of various groups, including the experience of oppressed communities, such as African Americans, homosexuals and lesbians, and religious minorities, such as Jews. Of course, we must also take into consideration the conclusions of such academic sources of truth as historical studies and scientific investigations.

Unfortunately, the testimony of the Bible and the testimony of reason conflict on the value of non-biblical religion. On the one hand, the Bible claims that all other religion is false and destructive and that we should shun it completely. In the Old Testament the first of the ten principal commandments is to have no other God than the biblical one. "You shall have no other gods besides me." In the New Testament we have a similar exclusiveness about Jesus. Jesus is the exclusive path to salvation. We see that claim in today's gospel. Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits." But on the other hand, reason tells us that there is great value in other religious paths, and insisting that there is not causes enormous social harm. In our pluralistic society most Christians have at least met people of other faiths, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims to name only three. We know from our own experience that these people are generally kind, intelligent, and sincere and that their own religious paths bring them comfort and happiness and even inspire them to serve the common good. We also know that religious intolerance promotes division and violence. How then are we as Episcopalians to reconcile



the conflicting claims of the Bible and reason about the value of other spiritual paths?

Of course, this is a huge question that cannot be adequately dealt with in a single sermon, but I would like to make three basic points briefly.

First, the religions that the Bible attacks were very primitive, and we should not assume that the biblical attacks apply to more advanced religion. During the biblical period other advanced religion did exist. Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. And Buddhism arose centuries before the birth of Christ. So did Confucianism and Daoism. But these high religions in southern and eastern Asia were unknown to Jesus and the biblical tradition in general. Instead, the religions that the biblical authors knew had very low ethical standards. One of the religions that the Old Testament attacks practiced human sacrifice. The primary religious tradition that the New Testament authors knew was the Greek one. Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, was a sex fiend having endless affairs, much to the annoyance of his divine wife Hera. Since she could not discipline her husband, Hera took out her aggressions on his lovers and even their kids. Since the biblical authors did not know other healthy religious tradition, they naturally condemned other religion. But we today should not use the biblical condemnation of other religion as a condemnation of the healthy religions of our Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic neighbors.

The second point is Christianity affirms that love is the heart of true religion, and the other high religious traditions agree. Jesus quoting the Old Testament said that the two great commandments were to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself. All the high religions teach something like the second great commandment. Indeed, Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam have a broader understanding of neighbor than at least traditional Christianity did. Traditionally, Christianity limited our neighbors to human beings, but Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam have always stressed that even animals deserve ethical treatment, a moral imperative that more and more Christians are now accepting. And non-Christians affirm the importance of love for ultimate reality—God in our language. The Daoists call the Dao “Mother;” the most popular form of Hinduism is Bakti, the spiritual path of love for God. And Muslims insist that absolutely nothing is more important than one's relationship with God to whose will one must submit in every way. If we share so much with other high religions, and what we share is the centrality of love, we should at the very least respect these religions.

The final point is we as Christians can affirm that our path is superior to other paths because our God shows a deeper form of love, but Christianity is only credible if we live like we actually believe this. Only Christianity teaches that the

One God became human and suffered torture and death to show how great his love is for all people and to teach us to love even our enemies. Other religions do not go this far. Hinduism certainly teaches that the god Krishna comes to earth from time to time to set things right, but Krishna in his various incarnations does not get crucified. Islam in response to Christianity denies any incarnation and teaches that God does not beget and is not begotten. So I would claim that Christianity is the best religion. But this claim becomes laughable when Christians who say that we believe in a God of love who taught us to love even our enemies act exceedingly unlovingly to people of other religions. A Christian once asked the great Hindu liberator and saint Ghandi what was greatest barrier to the spread of Christianity in India, and Ghandi replied, "The Christians." Christianity has a long and unsavory history of despising and persecuting other religions. Contemporary American politics with its growing anti-Semitism and anti-Islamic bias continues this disgraceful and indeed unchristian practice. Let us then as Christians affirm the superiority of our religious path by loving people of every religion and condemning any attempt to demean or exclude them.

## **Sermon on Being Spiritual and Religious**

At present this parish is dealing with how to be spiritual and religious. Whereas most of Marin County claims to be spiritual but not religious, we claim to be both. And we are now thinking about what it means to be both.

At least in this context, being religious includes supporting a continuing institution. When most residents of Marin County say that they are not religious, they mean they do not support a religious institution, and, especially, the institutional Christian church. Underlying this insistence that they are spiritual but not religious is an implicit feeling that institutional religion in general and Christianity in particular have done a lot of harm, whereas being “spiritual” is always good.

As today's reading from the Old Testament makes clear, institutional Christianity has always realized that people can easily mistake the trappings of institutional religion for the primary goal, and this mistake can indeed do harm. In the reading the prophet Isaiah condemns in the strongest terms people who merely observe the rituals of religion. Isaiah notes that people are regularly offering the customary religious sacrifices and fervently celebrating the traditional religious festivals and assume that they are doing all that God requires. In response, Isaiah speaking in behalf of God insists that God detests such one-sided, superficial piety. “Your appointed festivals my soul hates.” Instead, God demands ethical behavior, especially toward the marginal. “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” In other words, the primary goal of institutional religion is to please God by serving all of his people, especially those who are most in need, namely the marginal. What Isaiah preached is what down through the centuries the Judeo-Christian community has always preached. Think only of that great Baptist preacher Martin Luther King. Or for that matter think of the sermons of Kirsten Spalding, our own rector. The sermons of the Rev. King and the Rev. Spalding have been about serving God by serving the marginal. Of course, down through the centuries Christians have sometimes ignored the preaching and assumed that the trappings of religion are enough. And this neglect of the fundamentals has caused harm. But the official teaching of the church has always been that our devotion to God must express itself through justice to our neighbors, and our neighbors are especially those in most need of neighborly assistance.

By contrast, being “spiritual” without being religious tends to lead to social inaction for several reasons. First, the term “spiritual” is very vague and includes many things which are silly or even harmful and take up time and energy that could better be employed helping others. Studying astrology, experimenting with drugs, trying to get in touch with angels or other spiritual forces can all be described as “spiritual.” Second, in our individualistic society,

spiritual tends to mean seeking one's own individual happiness rather than finding fulfillment by serving others. If you ask people how they are being spiritual without being religious, they may well say that they spend time walking alone in nature, or spend time reading and writing poetry, or they have some personal way of meditating. Of course, all these things may be healthy. But they do little to help others. Even if someone is active in promoting social justice, not much is accomplished by oneself. Real change depends on working together in some organization. And as soon as we talk about an organization, we are institutionalizing and moving in the direction of institutional religion. But institutional religion also has a strength that secular political action groups and charities lack. Institutional religion explicitly calls on support from God, and God's support gives an energy that otherwise is missing.

God's support is especially important when a cause is huge, difficult and discouraging, and such is profoundly true today. Today we are dealing with enormous problems that affect the planet as a whole and are proving difficult to ameliorate. Here are two such problems. First there is climate change. All over the world we are already having unprecedented heat waves, floods, droughts, rising sea levels. And scientists warn us that the situation is deteriorating rapidly and large parts of the earth may become uninhabitable unless we take drastic action soon. Yet, despite the urgency of the situation, it is extremely difficult to get our political system to do what is essential. It has now taken two years of negotiations and many concessions to special interests to be on the verge of passing major legislation to address climate change. A second enormous and intractable problem is the rise of fascism in many countries including our own. By fascism I mean the rule of a single individual who stays in power by demonizing an unpopular minority, such as Jews, immigrants, or some sexual orientation. Thanks to the ongoing investigations into the events of January 6, 2021 we now know that our democracy nearly ended with the rule of one such man. In much of the world, including Russia and China, all freedom has vanished under such men. Yet, despite the now well established facts, large numbers of Americans refuse to believe that sedition occurred and even still support those who committed it. And in the totalitarian countries, opposition has at least so far been almost totally ineffective. In the face of such huge and discouraging problems, it is easy to give up. And it is especially easy to do so without the support of an institution that calls on God for help. Years ago I was listening to someone who was talking about the struggle for social justice in Latin America. He told me that people who did not rely on God could fight for justice for a few years, but then they would burn out. Only those who relied on God could persevere in the struggle despite continuing disappointment. And it is easier to rely on God when one belongs to a community that supports one another in deepening our dependence on God.

So then let us in this parish continue to be spiritual and religious. Let us be religious. Let us not forsake the trappings of religion. Flowers and candles, vestments and music all make a contribution to supporting genuine religion, provided that we realize that the primary goal of genuine religion is serving God and all of God's children, not entertaining ourselves. And let us call on God to support us in our quest for a more just and sustainable world, despite the many setbacks that discourage us. And let us remember to be spiritual in the better sense of the word. Let us remember that the most helpful forms of spirituality take us out of our selfish concerns and focus us on serving God and others. The times we live in are dark, and the hour is late; let us then by being spiritual and religious persevere in doing what God alone can enable us to accomplish.

## Sermon on Hell

Two selections from today's gospel: First, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." And, second, "Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

The older vision of hell as an endless torture chamber was at least entertaining.

Like horror movies the picture of souls roasting in eternal flames, being jabbed by devils with pitch forks, and bitten by huge snakes was not dull. Of course, for those who were vindictive it was especially pleasant to contemplate their enemies being in this sort of hell. What fun to see the people who hurt you getting their just deserts or even worse than their just deserts.

The traditional picture of hell as a lurid torture chamber was the logical product of older cultures which punished criminals with physical pain and which assumed that God caused natural disasters. In those days society could not afford to have a huge prison system which gave people free room and board for decades. So for crimes that did not warrant execution the penalty was the torture of forty lashes or a day in the stocks. Premodern society did not know that microbes caused epidemics and that shifting tectonic plates caused earthquakes. Instead, these were "acts of God." God was punishing people for their sins. Since society punished criminals with torture and believed that God punished the wicked with epidemics and earthquakes, it was natural to assume that at the last judgment the penalty would be similar. Consequently, we have all those dramatic depictions of people in hell roasting or devoured by snakes. We may note in passing that even today when we know that natural disasters have natural causes, we still sometimes call these calamities "acts of God." If I were God, I would sue for defamation of character.

Today few residents of the Bay Area take the older idea of hell as a threat seriously. Instead of fearing that we may end up with devils stabbing us with pitchforks, we cheerfully dress our children as devils on Halloween and send them out to use their demonic status to extort candy from our neighbors.

In the Episcopal Church we now recognize that a modern Christian understanding of hell must be compatible with the infinite love and forgiveness of God. Jesus said that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). God commands us to forgive seventy times seven and to love even our enemies. God must be at least as forgiving and loving as God commands us to be. Consequently, Christians should not think of hell as a torture chamber where God enjoys inflicting pain on people for their wickedness. If God created it, hell must be in accordance with his own love and ethics.

Life in heaven surely includes at least two things. First, there are no secrets in heaven "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known." In heaven we will know how everything we ever did affected all other lives, and everyone else will know how everything we ever did affected every other life. Second, in heaven everyone will have pure thoughts. No one will be angry or bitter or wish harm to anyone else.

Therefore, to enter heaven we must acknowledge every occasion we have ever hurt anyone, and we must purify our thoughts, and for some people this acknowledgment and purification will not be easy. For example, if we as a nation refuse to take serious action to deal with the ecological crisis, we will have to look at the destruction that we helped cause. We will have to live with the knowledge that we were responsible for the devastation of the natural world and for imposing misery and even death on countless millions of people over many generations. And in heaven we will be living with these people whose lives we have destroyed and who now know beyond doubt that we were responsible. Facing what we have done in the presence of those to whom we did it, will require a lot of painful growth. Nor will it be painless to purify our thoughts. Many of us here are old enough to remember when there was no sex or profanity on television, when motion pictures were not rated for adult content because there was none, a time when, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" violated censorship guidelines. Today when we watch prime time television, go to the movies, or listen to popular music we often fill our minds with filth and by doing so we debase ourselves. The Buddha taught that we are the product of all of that we have thought and that hell is a projection of what we have put into our own minds. As a Christian, I would not go that far, but I do know that to purify our minds of the filth that we put there we must go through anxiety and depression.

But suppose that we are not able or willing to face the harm we have caused or go through the pain of purification. What then? What about other people who have caused much more harm than we have and who have wallowed in degrading entertainment and filled their minds with fantasies of torture and sexual abuse. Suppose that they cannot go through the pain of facing how they have hurt others or go through the suffering of purification. It was once my privilege, and it was a privilege, to do intense counseling for a convicted serial child molester as he awaited sentencing and then when he was in prison. Initially, in my counseling I pressed him to acknowledge what he had done. But then I asked myself whether if I had destroyed the lives of half a dozen children would I be able to face what I had done.

Well, for people who not able or willing to face the harm they have caused or go through the pain of purifying their minds, there is the good news of hell. A loving God is not going to force us to face the truth if we refuse to. A merciful God is not going to make us go through the sufferings of purification if we are not prepared to endure them. God will not take away our freedom and deprive

us of the dignity of being able to make choices and live with their eternal consequences. A loving God has provided an alternative to the agony of having to admit choosing to destroy people, an alternative to feeling all of the filth that we have put into our own minds.

We do not know in detail what being in hell will be like. Perhaps there really are flames and snakes there, just as there are in this life. Perhaps there are even demons who attack us. Certainly, there are demonic people in hell, people who enjoy tormenting others.

But as Christians we do know that hell is basically being in solitary confinement. In hell people are bound, chained, unable to escape from a prison of their own making, because the escape would be too painful. Hell is a place where people are in darkness, because they cannot acknowledge what they have done and how it affected every other life. Hell is a place where everyone is in constant inner turmoil because they have not purified their minds of degrading thoughts and feelings. Hell is a place where everyone is in solitary confinement, even though vast numbers of people are present. Each person is so full of selfishness and violence, of lust and anger, that no one can sustain relationships based on love.

Perhaps this updated understanding of hell is better than the torture chamber of older imagination. Perhaps, but still it is no fun to be in darkness, inner turmoil, to be all alone in the midst of a vast crowd of individuals each of whom is also totally alone.



## Sermon on Heaven

There are various ideas of heaven in our culture. Probably many people imagine that heaven is a epitome of all of the material and bodily pleasures of this life. I call this point of view, the Carnical Cruise Lines version of heaven. When I used to teach religion at Dominican University of California, I actually showed pictures from the Carnival Cruise Lines web site. And I asked my students if this was their version of heaven, and, if so, how would they like spending eternity in the bars and dining rooms and ports. My youngest brother occasionally goes on these sorts of cruises, but he says that after enjoying them for a few days, he is desperate to return to normal life. A traditional vision of heaven was a place of endless rest, but this vision was more attractive before modern technology than today. Before the invention of so many labor saving devices, most people's lives consisted of nearly endless back breaking labor. In that situation endless rest sounded heavenly. Today for many of us, endless rest sounds as boring as hell. Traditional Christians often use images from the book of Revelation to picture heaven. It is in that book which climaxes the Bible that we have the famous golden streets, pearly gates, and white robes which appear in older Christian hymns and even in contemporary cartoons.

I think that we can safely assume that in heaven we will experience something at least remotely analogous to many of the pleasures of this life. Surely, heaven will at least be beautiful beyond our present imagination.

Nevertheless, the most important dimensions of heaven are clear: In heaven everyone has accepted the whole truth of their earthly lives and has moved forward. At the judgment God reveals to us what is in our hearts and reveals to us everything we ever did and how it affected every other life. In heaven people have acknowledged that truth, and with the help of God and others have grown.

In heaven everyone's heart has been purified. In their earthly lives the future inhabitants of heaven at least made some effort not to wallow in destructive thoughts, some effort not to harbor hatred, some effort not to view others as things to exploit. Consequently, at the judgment when God showed them what was in their hearts, the saved rejoiced over the many charitable thoughts they had had on earth, rejoiced over the peace and love and joy that they had lived. And it was relatively easy for the saved to acknowledge those things in their hearts which still needed healing. And cooperating with God love, the saved had grown immensely and as a result are totally freed from the mistakes of the past and are fully open to loving and being loved.

In heaven everyone is fully able to serve one another. In their earthly lives the future inhabitants of heaven at least partially served one another. And this earlier experience has helped prepare them to serve one another fully in heaven.

In addition, at the Judgment the saved saw all of the times that they did in fact serve others and rejoiced. And the saved also saw all of the times when they failed to serve one another, and when they saw it, they were filled with regret. Consequently, they desired to serve better, and God in his love for them cooperated with that desire, and the saved became able to serve one another completely.

Service in heaven in contrast to service on earth is always a joy. Service on earth can sometimes be pleasant, especially when we contemplate how we have successfully helped others. However, because of the limited time and energy people have here, and because of all of the brokenness and sinfulness, service can be difficult on earth. By contrast, in heaven there is no limitation of time and energy, no brokenness and sinfulness, and service is a joy.

In heaven everyone fully loves everyone else, and everyone feels fully loved by everyone else. The saved learned to love and accept love at least partially while on earth. And at the Judgment the saved experienced fully how their own love helped others, and how being loved by others helped them. And the saved earnestly desired to grow in loving and accepting love. And God in his graciousness granted that wish. So everyone is radiant with joyful love for all, and everyone is radiant with the joy of being loved. And, of course, everyone feels deeply loved by God and loves God deeply, the God that the saved know stood by them during earthly life and now has welcomed into heaven.

Finally, in heaven everyone is penetrated and covered with God's glory. Here is the profound truth that underlies the extravagant images of streets of gold and pearly gates. The gold of which Revelation speaks is not literal gold, because the gold in paradise is also as clear as crystal. The gates of paradise are not literal pearls, because pearls do not come in the shape of gates. Instead, Revelation is using literary symbolism. In Revelation's vision of paradise everything is either transparent like some of the jewels that adorn the city or shiny like pearls and white robes, and God is the light. The symbolic message is apparent. In heaven everyone and everything will be a window or a mirror through which God is also visible. Everyone and everything will, of course, be itself completely but God will also shine through with his love, his truth, and his creative majesty.

If there is any defect in the joy of heaven, it is the sorrow over the sufferings and sins of those on earth, but even that sorrow is limited. Those in heaven feel keenly the pain of those who remain in the tribulations of earthly existence. And those in heaven grieve over the sins which people on earth commit. Nevertheless, those in heaven know that the pain on earth is only passing and that paradise is everlasting and that, therefore, no matter how great the pain on earth, all have the prospect of eternal joy. And those in heaven know that sinners always have the freedom to seek God and repent, and if they do so God will bring them to salvation.