

“When Faith Becomes a Force”

a sermon by

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**Text: “....holding on to the outward form of godliness but denying its power..”
(II Timothy 3:5).**

Several weeks ago Thomas Friedman wrote a column in the New York Times, entitled “In My Next Life,” in which he imagined what he might be, if he had the opportunity. One of the people he said he would like to be in his next life is Tom Delay, the majority leader of the House of Representatives. He wanted the whole House of Representatives to lay aside the ethics rule that requires party leaders to step down if they are indicted on a felony charge. He wanted to be like the politicians in Washington, who wear a little American flag on their lapels in solidarity with our troops in Iraq, while they besmirch every value they are dying for.

If he couldn't be Tom Delay, then Friedman said he would like to be Latrell Sprewell, the professional basketball player for the Minnesota Timberwolves. He wanted to be able to say with a straight face to the owner of the franchise that unless the owner was willing to give Sprewell a three-year contract extension for \$21,000,000 he didn't want to work for him, because as Sprewell put it, "I've got my family to feed."

And if he couldn't be Latrell Sprewell, Friedman wrote, he would at least like to be any American college or professional athlete. For a mere dunk of the basketball or a first down-run, he wanted to be able to dance a little jig in the end zone as if he had just broken every record by Michael Jordan or Johnny Unitas. For even the smallest, most routine bit of success in his sport, he wanted to be able to get in someone's face to ask, "Who's your daddy?" To "high five," "low five," thump his chest and dance on your grave. "You talking to me?" He wanted to be able to fight on the court, off the court and in the stands, to respect no boundaries or norms.

Friedman went on to say that if he couldn't be "The Man," then he wanted to be the owner of a Hummer, not only because the owners of Hummers are generally a little more patriotic than the rest of us, but also because Hummers are the mother of all gas guzzlers that gets so little mileage that you have to drive from gas station to gas station. Yes, he said, he wanted to drive a gas consuming SUV without ever having to think that by consuming so much oil, we are making transfer payments to the worst Arab regimes in the world that transfer money to Islamic charities, that transfer money to the madrasses, that teach children intolerance, anti-pluralism, and how to hate Americans.

One does not have to be a columnist for the New York Times to understand that these are very dangerous times in which we live today. Many of us are concerned about an ongoing war, the debate on moral values, mounting deficits, the terrible blight of poverty in our inner cities, the struggle for education and health care--just to name a few.

Yet, troubling as these things may be, these are not the things that trouble me the most. What is most troubling to me is that I detect a sense of weariness in many Americans today. I wonder if we have lost the sense of faith and confidence in our ability to face the problems that are before us or whether the divisions that separate us will destroy us.

I.

In Paul's letter to his young friend Timothy we get a glimpse of the Apostle Paul in the last days of his life. In contrast to Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica, which expected the eminent return of Christ, II Timothy is a letter in which Paul begins to recognize that the return of Christ may not be eminent. He seems more interested in issues of organization. He also senses that the great threat to the church was not going to come from outside but from inside. In the passage I have read this morning Paul outlines nineteen evils that Timothy can expect in church and society: "lovers of self, lovers of money, lovers of pleasure." All of these he contrasts to what we are called to be and that is "lovers of God." As John Calvin astutely observed, all of

these vices are rooted in the “love of self” over the “love of God.” They are as real today as they were two thousand years ago.

One of the characteristics of this condition that Calvin called “the universal condition of the Christian church” is what Paul describes as “holding on to the outward form of religion, but denying its power” (II Timothy 3:5). And that is where I want to focus this morning, for unless we are able to hold on to the content of our faith, we may outwardly profess it, but on the inside, its power will be gone. So how do we ensure that our faith is a force and not a farce?

II.

First, if our faith is going to be a force to be reckoned with, we are going to have to recover a sense of the “common good.” All of the evils that Paul enumerates in his letter to Timothy are rooted in a society where the “love of self” transcends all other loves.

One of the sharpest debates with which the founders of this country had to wrestle with was the conflict between “individual interests” and the “common good.” The framers of the constitution sought to give individuals room to pursue their own interests, but always held that the interest of the individual had to be checked by the “common good.” Much of the malaise that affects the church and our nation today is the result of a loss of the willingness of individuals to subvert their own personal self-interest for the interest of society at large. We have spawned a Generation of narcissists for whom the “me first” principle take precedent over everything else. One of the most difficult aspects of being a minister is dealing with individuals who are so concerned about their own program, their own issue, their own project, that they cannot see what is good for the total church. Dean Rusk, a former Secretary of State, once told about growing up in Cherokee County, Georgia. His family owned a small farm in a small farming community. It was in the early days of the telephone and the community had rigged up a system of communication between each of the farms through a crude telephone system. One short ring and three long ones meant that the phone was for you. One short ring and two long rings meant that the call was for someone else, but you could always listen in on someone else’s conversation. Three long rings meant there was an emergency and that everyone was supposed to come to the phone. Now, in Cherokee County, Mr. Rusk said there were only three things that constituted an emergency. The first was if a mad dog was in the neighborhood. The second was if there was a fire. The third thing that constituted an emergency in Cherokee County was if an agent of the federal government was on someone’s property. “We didn’t need them,” said Rusk. “We didn’t look to Washington to solve our problems.”

But where are the statesmen today? Where are our citizens? Where are those who start by thinking of ourselves as members of a great republic whose interest, whether banking, industry, religion or the law, cannot succeed unless we succeed together? If our faith is to become a force in this community and in this nation, it will be because we are able to recover the common good.

III.

Secondly, if our faith is going to be more than the outward form of godliness, we are going to have to recover a sense of toleration. Many of the people who came to the shores of this nation came to rid themselves of the imposition of the state upon religion. One of the most dangerous impulses in our political life today is the tendency of people to demonize those who do not agree with them. This was certainly true in the last Presidential election, where President Bush and his supporters were often accused of being stupid and ignorant and Senator Kerry was often painted as a “left wing communist flip flopper.”

This lack of toleration is particularly evident in the debate today about “moral values.” There are numerous groups in our country today who believe that there is only one position that Christians can take on such complex issues as abortion, stem cell research, and homosexuality. In truth, there are a number of political, social, and economic issues on which Christians do not agree. We must understand that pluralism is not necessarily evil. Each of us has something to contribute, but each of us needs to be warned against pretending to have more truth than we actually possess. In his great book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr addressed what he called the problem of “Having and Not Having the Truth.” Niebuhr made the point that as Christians we believe that we have the truth in Jesus Christ. But there is another sense in which we do not have the truth. We are creatures and not the creator. We are also sinners, which means that we perceive the truth through the eyes of our own self-interest. For that reason we need to listen and respect those who do not always agree with us.

Central to the notion of toleration is the idea that we are all bound to one another, and if one falls, all are in danger of falling. Martin Niemoller was a German pastor who, along with others, opposed the rise of Hitler to power in Germany. Because he spoke out against the Nazis, he was placed in prison. After his release he observed: “The Nazis came for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then, they came for the Jews, and because I wasn’t a Jew, I didn’t speak out.” “Then,” he said, “they came for the Trade Unionists, and because I wasn’t a Trade Unionists, I did not speak up.” “Then,” he said, “they came for me...and by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone.”

IV.

Then, finally, if our faith is going to become a force and not just an outward form of religion, we are going to have to recover the notion of the sovereignty and providence of God. As Christians, we do not believe that we are living in an impersonal world, even after the terrible event such as the Tsunamis that struck Southern Asia two weeks ago.

Apart from the notion of the God who works for good for those who love him, we are all without real hope, victims of what David Brooks called “nature’s awful lottery.” The Christian hope, however, is that God is active in the created order, even as God is active in human history.

In his *Memoirs*, Dean Rusk, who served as Secretary of State under President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson, recalled the “Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.” It was the closest that the world has ever come to nuclear war. The Americans had learned that the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba and a young American President, John Kennedy, had ordered the Soviets to remove the missiles. It was a classic standoff. As Rusk recalls it, all our missiles were prepared to strike the Russians. All our B-52s were in the air. The nation was on “red alert.” During this tense time Rusk said that his mind kept turning to a question in the Shorter Catechism he had learned in a Presbyterian Church in Georgia: “What is man’s chief end?” Suddenly, it occurred to him that this was an operational question before the entire world. “What is life all about?” “Why are we here?” That is a basic human question and it is that for us is rooted in our belief that we are not part of blind cosmos hurtling through space without any direction or guidance, but the basic truth about our lives is that we are created by God, redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that nothing can separate us from his love.

I, for one do not believe that God has placed us on this planet to be destroyed by terrorists who fly airplanes into buildings. I do not believe that God has placed us here to destroy the air we breathe or the water we drink. Our faith tells us something more. It tells us we are called to be the children of God.

This is the kind of confidence and hope we need to recover for today. It is not confidence and hope that is built on neither our own inherent goodness, nor even our military might. It is confidence that is built and a sovereign and loving God.

Amen.