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Date: July 12, 2015
Sermon Title: Religion in the News 2015
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scriptures: Isaiah 52:7; Mark 16:15; Romans 10:15

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

Mark 16:15

And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'

Romans 10:15

And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

Friday's *New York Post*—you've got to love it! Huge color photo of Pope Francis opening the door of a Burger King. The headline: "It's Burger King of Kings!" It's not the only reference that equates the pope with God. The very first sentence reads, "Burger King just got an A-rating from God!"

You see, the pope is on a visit to South America, and when he was in Bolivia, he dashed into a Burger King to change his vestments for Mass. The *New York Post* continued its deification of the pope, saying that the Burger King "became the holiest of holies." None of this is the pope's fault; my guess is that he would be appalled, but the tabloid hunt for catchy headlines plus really bad theology by the journalist makes this the great lead story for a sermon on "Religion in the News."

In one short article, a newspaper misplays "the holy of holies" (that's actually where God lives in the Temple in Jerusalem) and "the King of Kings" (that's actually Jesus); and then flat-out equates God and the pope, offensive to both God and pope.

Yes, I know . . . no big deal, a fake photo, a silly “filter article,” and who reads the paper for theology anyway? Or, as the Rolling Stones put it, “Who wants yesterday’s papers? Who wants yesterday’s news?” But news is still news. We read it or watch it, we take it in. We even talk about “devouring the news” or being “news junkies.” *I am a “news junkie.”*

People may say that religion is in decline (which I don’t believe), but the media is full of religion—good, bad, and indifferent. And invariably, all that “religion in the news” is good for at least two reasons. One, they may teach you something; two, they make you think.

Friday, NPR had a feature story on a big conference in Florida this week, a conference to get pastors to run for political office. We evidently need more clergy running the country. Oh, yeah; that’s a good idea.

Pat Robertson ran for president a couple of times. On his TV show this summer he was answering questions that had been sent to him. One was about a family whose little child had died, and the questioner wanted to know what to say to the family. The ordained clergy, Rev. Pat Robertson’s answer was that God must have known that child could have grown up to be a Hitler or a Stalin and beyond salvation, so God kept that baby from sinning and so did the right thing in taking the child.

That’s “religion in the news” and, by golly, both stories, Pat Robertson’s advice to a grieving mother and a Florida conference to get pastors into politics, both get you to thinking. Seriously. I’m not being flip or sarcastic. Those stories, if we stop to think about them, open up discussions about the separation of church and state, God’s will, evil, heaven, what *is* a pastor, and grief. That’s really what this is all about. With each article, I’m looking for fodder (sometimes “manure” is the better word), something to make us think.

I first began a focus on “religion in the news” when I was a pastor up in the Berkshires. A radio station asked me to create a program. I invited a rabbi to join me. And every Monday we discussed religion in the news. We were the lead-ins for Rush Limbaugh. You can tell me after church whether you’re grateful to me or mad at me, but anyway, I had that show for four years before I came here.

Once here, I turned it into our regular Sunday morning adult class. We have it in the parlor after the 10:30 service, September to June. Believe me when I tell you we have great fun back there—lively conversation around interesting topics, all culled from, yes, “religion in the news.” So every summer I preach one sermon on this topic for two reasons: first, to entice

you to join us in September. Nobody takes attendance, you don't have to come every week, nobody gets called on, so try it! Second, I do want all of you to get in the habit, however you get your news—I don't care if it's network or cable, if it's Internet or newspaper, talk radio, social media, liberal or conservative, however you get your news, there is plenty of religion there. I want you to notice, to read it, to think. Let "religion in the news" be part of your spiritual discipline.

Our Scriptures today all refer to news. Isaiah declares, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who say to all, 'God reigns.'" Jesus's last words on earth were, "Preach the Good News to all creation." And St. Paul, writing about the importance of preaching, just quotes Isaiah—our job is news, we have news that everybody should know.

All I'm saying is there are lots of ways to get that news, and we can even turn the news of the day, the world news, the local news, the news media, the newspapers, we can use all that "news" to get to the "Good News."

Nothing exemplifies that better than the horrible tragedy of the murders at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. That is "bad news," at its worst. And yet, as I've been collecting news stories for today, the three biggest collections were on these three topics: Pope Francis, people in America with no religion, and the events in Charleston.

They may actually be more intertwined than you think; plus, there may be more "good news" in there than you think. Let's start with the Americans with no religion. This is based on polls and surveys where, when people are asked for religious affiliation, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Episcopalian, Congregationalists, etc., more and more people are checking off "none of the above," so much so that people are now calling that a category, "Nones." I have articles from *The Wall Street Journal*: "Gathering the Faithful, No Church Required"; and from *The New York Times*: "Thou Shalt Worship None of the Above"; and "Religion Without God."

These articles mentioned atheists' attempts to re-create the feeling of church without beliefs getting in the way, so they have a sermon, music, ritual, and fellowship, even Christmas Eve services. Just no God. And they mentioned "grab-bag" religion, "custom tailoring" your beliefs to fit you, rather than trying to fit you to belief.

Of particular interest was a *Yale Daily News* op-ed called, "Filling Religion's Void." This was a college kid writing in his college paper, lamenting, worrying about the decline of religious values and wondering out loud where today's college kids would find their moral compass, what will be their

anchor, their touchstone, their guiding star? Think about it. That's an Ivy League, secular-humanist, liberal, 21st-century college newspaper, wondering where young people are going without God!

Into religion's void, into the world of "none of the above" steps . . . Pope Francis; steps . . . Charleston's Emanuel AME church. All of a sudden, the morning papers and the evening news and the Internet are filled with Scripture and hymns and sermon quotations and snippets of prayer, as the pope speaks in the Balkans, the pope speaks in Argentina, leaving people to wonder what he'll say when he comes to America.

Operating straight from the Bible, the pope challenges the world to look at creation, to look at work, to look at economics, to look at governance and find a way to live in this world as God intended when God created. He has tackled the filth in our environment, Armenian genocide, blind politicians, vengeful religion. He has spoken for all of us who are worried about the future, about ISIS, about the poor, and about church. This week he called "unfettered capitalism" the "dung of the devil." Let's face it. He's got people thinking. Listening. Reacting. Pro and con. But no "ho-hum."

Pope Francis is willing to bring in his Bible, his God, his faith into direct contact with every aspect of human endeavor. As one newspaper put it, "Pope Francis knows how to direct the spotlight," going on to quote a "man on the street," who said for his whole life being Catholic meant being against this, that, and the other; now, being Catholic is being *for* things, *for* compassion *for* love, *for* the poor. He liked that.

I think what we're seeing in our lifetime is a change in religion from ossified, petrified, rigidified, institutionalized, denominationalized, bureaucratized, organized religion, away from that to living, breathing church.

That Yale student in his op-ed was asking this: what will replace religion, what will fill the void left by the departure of religion from center stage in our national life? And the answer can be *us*, the living church. Something real, personal, dynamic, something that feels, breathes, that actually touches.

We see that in Charleston, and not just at that Emanuel AME Church. There's something happening in Charleston that is touching America, fed by the myriad churches of Charleston, embraced by the myriad colors of Charleston, working acts of miracle that make us look to God in fresh ways.

Here are some headlines:

"An Altered Church, a Steadfast Faith,"
"Love and Terror in the Black Church,"
"AME Church Shows How to Forgive,"
"Charleston Families Show Nation the Way Forward,"
"Clemente Pinckney, Called at 13."

That last article told how Clemente (named after the great Pittsburgh Pirates baseball player Roberto Clemente after he was killed in a plane crash on his way to helping others); when when Rev. Pinckney was 13 years old, he was standing alone in his little rural childhood church, when he heard the voice of God declaring, "Preach! I have called you to preach the Gospel!" His life of preaching laid the groundwork for all those victims' families, one by one, to step up in the courtroom and themselves preach the Gospel of forgiveness. To the murderer they preached love, repentance, salvation. And a few days later, the president of the United States, *UNITED States*, preached the Gospel of grace, explaining to a grieving nation the heart of Jesus's Gospel.

These almost three weeks have been marked by countless news stories that carried the heart of the Gospel in each story, as people cited Scripture, sang the old hymns, prayed stirring prayers of faith, and called upon the greatness of God to heal our deepest hurts. All that was reported across the news. And that's happening.

"Amazing Grace" has practically become a national anthem. The American flag has regained pride of place. Church is now a symbol of extraordinary love. And those who will not love and those who would diminish the American flag and those who cannot believe in grace are adrift.

I've read two articles that reflect that, including an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times*, "Why I Can't Forgive the Killer in Charleston" by Roxane Gay. We understand the writer, don't we? Her anger, her hurt, her rage, her thirst for revenge. Her righteous indignation that mirrors our own. But we admire the people of Charleston and Emanuel. We aspire to be them. We love them. And how do we know about them? *The news!*

Normally, in times of such horror, the "who/what/where/when/why" of journalism is focused on the killer. Not this time. Instead, the news media has been captivated by the faith of the victims, the love of the family, the courage of the church, the spirit of the city, the vision of its leaders, the decency of the people.

In Luke's Gospel, there's a strange little story about two news stories of the day. News had come that Pontius Pilate had killed a number of Jews, crassly desecrating the Jewish Temple. And news had come of a tragic building

accident: a tower had fallen, killing 18 people. And, as always happens with tragedy, people want to know why, assign blame, even point the finger at the victims. But Jesus wouldn't play that game. Instead, he preached the Good News, he assured us the victims were blessed with God, and he used the occasion to point us in the right direction.

I invite you into the world of Good News. Every day there are funny stories, provocative stories, strange stories, hard stories, amazing stories, inspiring stories. Listen to the titles:

"Why Do We Experience Awe?"
"Our Father, Who Art on Broadway,"
"Clergy Backlash vs. Mayor de Blasio,"
"Do We Need to Integrate Our Churches?"
"The Necessary Jewishness of Israel,"
"Eighty-six-year-old Man Bar-Mitzvaed,"
"Turning Churches Into Luxury Condos."

That's where I'll end. "Turning Churches Into Luxury Condos." The landscape of churches is changing. Yes, churches are fading away, dwindling, irrelevant, dying, closing; being turned into restaurants, museums, luxury condos. But I don't think we'll see Emanuel AME Church closing. Not a church with a living faith, a living Bible, and a living God.

They are the news of the day