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Sermon Title: "Religion in the News"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Philippians 1:12-18

Philippians 1:12-18

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

There are two parts to today's sermon: now and later. What we do with "Religion in the News" and why we do "Religion in the News." Nowadays, if you put "religion" and "news" in the same sentence, people think it is political because nowadays everything is politicized. Everything is viewed as Republican or Democrat, right or left, pro-Trump or anti-Trump. So, for the record, I've been doing "Religion in the News" forever, my whole career. I even had a radio show!

Part I:

Every day I look for articles and items pertaining to the world of religion and use them to get us thinking. Some articles are obvious, with God or Church or religion right there in the title. Some beg a religious response, even if there is no hint of religion in the story. For example, a few weeks ago, a 104-year-old Australian went to Switzerland to have his life ended. There was no mention of

God or faith in the whole article, but still, what an important story about life and death and eternal life and ethics and suffering.

Then, once a year in the summer, I preach a "Religion in the News" sermon to entice you to get in the habit. Look for religion in your news sources. I guarantee you, they're everywhere in every section in every newspaper. It doesn't matter if you like the article or not, if you disagree with the story or not, if it's slanted or biased, even out-and-out anti-religion. Use it for thinking hard. Let it prime your pump.

Some articles make it easy for you. On December 24 and 25 of last year, *The New York Times's* Nicholas Kristof had two huge op-ed articles, one titled "Cardinal, Am I a Christian?" The other, "Pastor, Am I a Christian?" In each article he interviewed a prominent Christian leader, bared his doubts, asked his questions, listened to their answers, and invited us to listen in on what makes a Christian. You can't get more "Religion in the News" than that!

Or the Christmas Sunday, December 24, 2017, *New York Times Book Review* section: the entire section, from cover story to inside back cover, every inch about religion! Listen to the titles:

"God: a Human History"

"Martin Luther: the Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World"

"What the Quran Meant and Why It Matters"

"The Story of the Jews"

"Bethlehem: Biography of a Town"

"The Exodus"

"The Abu Dhabi Bar Mitzvah"

"Heaven on Earth: the Scientific Search for the Afterlife, Immortality, and Utopia"

All that in one section of the Sunday paper!

Now, you may not be surprised that the largest number of articles is about President Trump. The president-oriented articles come from a contentious pre-election, a contentious election, and a contentious post-election, with articles trying to explain it all, particularly the role of religion. Here are some of the more interesting headlines:

"The Evangelicalism of the White Man"

"In Trump Evangelicals Trust"

"The Twilight of White Christianity"

"After Backing Trump, Evangelicals Find Door to White House Open"

“Why Rural America Voted for Trump”
“Can Trump Christians Really Be Christian?”
“I Am Done Being a Southern Baptist”
“Young Evangelicals Waver Over Israel”
“Black Worshipers Leaving Evangelical Churches in Quiet Exodus”
“White Evangelical Women, Core Trump Supporters, Tiptoeing Away”
“Partisanship From the Pulpit Splits Evangelicals”

Religion first became really, really important in politics with JFK. He was Catholic, and he actually had to have a big meeting with Protestant clergy to convince them that the Pope wouldn't run the White House.

When Jimmy Carter came along, people had to figure out what he meant when he said he was “born again,” and what he meant when he said in a *Playboy* interview that he had lusted in his heart and therefore was guilty of adultery; and what he meant when he quit his Church in Georgia when they wouldn't accept a black member, and so he started a Church down the road.

And when the Orthodox Jew Joe Lieberman, the Mormon Mitt Romney, the Seventh-day Adventist Ben Carson ran for national office, those were the “Religion-in-the-News” items of the day.

Religion articles about Donald Trump began when he declared that he had never asked for forgiveness. That, you see, is theological, that is “religion . . . in the news.” Why? Because forgiveness, along with some idea of sin, repentance, atonement, *forgiveness* is central to just about every religion in the universe.

Add to that cable TV, the internet, the 24-hour news cycle, and you end up with all those headlines I just read. But here's the fun thing for us: we don't use “Religion in the News” to score points or make politics. All those headlined articles invite us to think about these questions: What is an evangelical? What is the role of race in religion and religion in race? What do Christians want from their Church? What about separation of Church and state? What is a Seventh-day Adventist, a Southern Baptist, a Mormon, or an Orthodox Jew? Is forgiveness important?

That's what I'm inviting you to do, look for “Religion in the News,” religion in the public arena, religion in daily life. It's all around us. Look at it. Discuss it.

Part II

If we heard that Scripture lesson correctly, St. Paul was in prison, in chains, for his faith! He was living out his faith in a day-to-day way that annoyed people

enough that they threw him in jail. But he's happy because everybody is talking about Jesus! Some sincerely, some mocking, some for their own gain. But Paul's happy because everybody is talking about Jesus.

Paul was like that famous saying in the advertising world, "I don't care what you say about me as long as you spell my name correctly." Or the saying attributed to Sears, Roebuck (except nobody knows if it was Mr. Sears or Mr. Roebuck), "Only half of my advertising works, but I don't know which half."

All Paul knows is he is in jail for talking about Jesus, and all of a sudden everybody is talking about Jesus. No such thing as bad publicity, I guess.

That's the basic premise behind "Religion in the News." Whenever religion makes it into the news, good, bad, or ugly, it's good for us. It gets people talking. It's an opening for us who actually care about religion or God or faith or Church or Christ. If somebody's talking about it, if somebody's writing about it, if somebody's thinking about it, we use such articles as jumping-off points for deeper discussion about our faith. Here's a sample of some fascinating news stories about religion:

"Are Christians Communists?"

"The Supreme Court Let Me Live My Faith Again"

"God Should Sue Roy Moore for Defamation"

"Christian Students at UCONN: Huskies in Christ"

"Minesweepers Along the Jordan River So Pilgrims Can Be Baptized"

"The Great #MeToo Awakening for Evangelical Christianity"

"Trump's Critics Desecrate the Holocaust"

"The Christian Case for Gun Control"

"Amid Fears That Evil Is Winning, Learning To Cast Out Il Diavolo"

"Socially Unacceptable Christians"

"Buddhist Holiday Has Sri Lanka Pondering Place of Religion"

"Crosses Lead to Culture Clash in Germany"

When you add countless articles about Pope Francis in China, the pope and gays, the pope and migrants, the pope and the environment, you end up delving into communism, secularism, exorcism, demons, racism, gun control. And should Christians eat at Chick-fil-A? And what is Holy Communion? *All* with a religious angle.

Likewise, religion was at the heart of hot-button topics: school shootings, police shootings, the Charlottesville KKK/Nazi rally. And if I can't get 10 good discussions out of America moving our embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, I'm hopeless! The Bible, the Promised Land, the Chosen People, the Holocaust,

Israel, the Middle East, and Christianity—all from one news story about our embassy. You see, religion, Christians, we are *not* bystanders in the world.

The Bible says, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it.” (Psalm 24:1) An old hymn echoes that idea, “This Is My Father’s World.” Or, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” In other words, what happens all around us must interest us, must engage us.

I love what a Chinese-American politician said this week in New York City: “You either have a seat at the table, or you’re on the menu.” Keeping an eye on “Religion in the News” gives you a seat at the table, or at least a window, into what is happening that will affect your religion and your Church. I guarantee it.

Today, I’ll briefly highlight four articles: about going to Church, about grief, about liberals who love Jesus, about Vietnam and Jesus.

Regarding going to Church, or worship, or synagogue, *The New York Times* had two splendid Op-Ed columns. The always-spiritual David Brooks wrote this. I’m just going to quote it. He writes better than I preach.

“With Hanukkah coming to an end, Christmas days away, and people taking time off work, we are in a season of quickened faith. When you watch people exercise that faith, whether lighting candles or attending midnight Mass, the first thing you see is how surprising it is. You’d think faith would be a simple holding of belief, or a confidence in things unseen, but, in real life, faith is unpredictable and ever-changing.

“It begins, for many people, with an elusive experience of wonder and mystery
. . . .

“Most believers seem to have had these magical moments of wonder and clearest consciousness, which suggested a dimension of existence beyond the everyday. Maybe it happened during childbirth, with music, in nature, in love or pain, or during a moment of overwhelming gratitude and exaltation.

“These glimmering experiences are not in themselves faith, but they are the seed of faith.” (Brooks, David. “The Subtle Sensations of Faith.” *The New York Times*, 23 December, 2014. p. A27)

I link that with an Op-Ed titled “This Easter I’ll Be Back in Church” by Margaret Renkl. She cites all the usual reasons for being turned off of religion and Church, but then she writes, “But I do miss being part of a congregation. I miss standing side by side with other people . . . our voices murmuring the same

prayers in a fallen world. I miss the wiggling babies [and] reaching for a stranger to offer the handshake of peace

“So I will be at Mass again on Easter . . . And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.” (Renkl, Margaret. “This Easter I’ll Be Back in Church.” *The New York Times*, 26 March, 2018. p. A23)

That’s in your daily newspaper, not your preacher, not your Bible, not some famous theologian. Your morning paper.

Another *Times* Op-Ed, titled “After Great Pain, Where is God?” The writer recounts his own litany of sorrows leading to the age-old question, “Where is God?” How can God be good if such things happen? What kind of God allows so much hurt? He quotes the great C. S. Lewis, who wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pain . . .” Once C. S. Lewis lost his beloved wife, he was more constrained as he described going to God “when your need is desperate . . . and what do you find? A door slammed in your face . . .” But Wehner dares to go beyond our discouragement to a radical understanding of the meaning of Jesus’s death and the Cross.

He concludes: “The book of Isaiah, in prophesying the messiah, describes him as ‘man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’ We’re told ‘by his wounds we are healed.’ For those of the Christian faith, God is a God of wounds, where the road to redemption passes directly through suffering. There is some solace in knowing that while at times life is not easy for us, it was also hard for the God of the New Testament. And from suffering, compassion can emerge . . .” (Wehner, Peter. “After Great Pain, Where Is God?” *The New York Times*, 25 March, 2017. p. SR10)

Troubled times and faith do go hand in hand. People talk confidently about “no atheists in foxholes” or “the crucible of faith” or “the blood of martyrs strengthening the Church.” But, people also talk about losing faith, hating God, turning bitter when things go bad. Both sides are a reaction to tough events that yearn for meaning, if not “divine intervention.”

Christianity, like everything else, has two sides at least: left and right, liberal and conservative, both trying to make sense of bad things happening to good people. For a long time the religious right was all about Jesus, sin, and heaven; the liberal left was about fixing things in the here and now. Thank God, the sands have shifted. Social justice warriors are embracing faith. People of faith are embracing social justice.

People are looking at faith in new ways, tired of old labels, believing that faith should make a difference. There are now more and more Christians who openly

love Jesus, who proudly use their Bible, who energetically pursue the "Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven."

I've been lucky; I was on the front lines at this emergence back in the late '70s, at the beginnings of Habitat for Humanity. There we were, a group of Christians building houses with the poor, facing off with government officials, praying and advocating, sweating and preaching, fixing and loving, all at the same time, all in the name of Christ.

Alida and 307 of her closest friends were doing the same thing all week down in Appalachia. They were standing for all the hallmarks of liberal progressive Christianity: side by side with the poor, black and white together, in urban streets and forgotten rural America; and every nail pounded, all the wood sawed, every roof repaired, every foundation dug, every friendship made in the Spirit of Christ, with Christ's words, Christ's example, Christlikeness front and center. That's the new face of Christianity.

My last story comes out of the burning cauldron of Vietnam with the shocking title, "Thank God for Those Bombs: A Napalm Attack Scarred My Body, But It Also Led Me to Christ." Many of us will never forget the photo from June 8, 1972, a 9-year-old girl, naked, running along the road, arms outstretched, mouth wide open, screaming in pain, her body burned by napalm, bombed by her own South Vietnamese soldiers, leaving her with "immeasurable pain," "filling her life with 'so much suffering.'" And yet, today, she is filled with gratitude. "Those bombs led me to Christ," she declares. As a teenager she stumbled across a Bible and discovered a Jesus who also had suffered, who knew her pain, and she wanted to be close to such a one as Him. This is how she closed her story:

"And there, in a small Church in Vietnam, mere miles from the street where my journey had begun amid the chaos of war—on the night before the world would celebrate the birth of the Messiah—I invited Jesus into my heart.

"When I woke up that Christmas morning, I experienced the kind of healing that can only come from God. I was finally at peace.

"Nearly half a century has passed since I found myself running—frightened, naked, and in pain—down that road in Vietnam. I will never forget the horrors of that day—the bombs, the fire, the shrieks, the fear. Nor will I forget the years of trial and torment that followed. But when I think about how far I have come—the freedom and peace that comes from faith in Jesus—I realize there is nothing greater or more powerful than the love of our blessed Savior.

“My faith in Jesus has enabled me to forgive those who have hurt and scarred me. It has enabled me to pray for my enemies rather than curse them. And it has enabled me not just to tolerate them but truly to love them.

“I will forever bear the scars of that day, and that picture will always serve as a reminder of the unspeakable evil of which humanity is capable. That picture defined my life. In the end, it gave me a mission, a ministry, a cause.

“Today, I thank God for that picture. Today, I thank God for everything—even for that road. *Especially* for that road.” (Kim, Phuc Phan Thi. “Thank God for Those Bombs.” *Christianity Today*. 20 April, 2018. p. 86.)

Forty-five minutes ago, we sang the only hymn in the hymnbook that references “news.” “Publish glad tidings,” we sang, “tidings of peace, tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.” Turns out there are lots of “glad tidings” in the news. It’s all around us. Just look for it. It’s waiting.