

Scripture Luke 13:1-5

Repent or Perish

13 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Today we're thinking about the news, and how often they deal with religion. So, I'm starting with a just written, unfinished, not edited at all, imperfect poem about "the News."

News, by God

News. News! NEWS!!!
News of the day
whatever is at play
frightening, disturbing, invigorating
inspiring
who shot who, and why
who married who, and where
Business news of the day
braying at the moon
about
this or that.

Trump. Biden
Trump Biden
trumpbiden, trumpbiden, trumpbiden
and Putin
anything Bezos, Musk, or Kardashian
scandal, blood, or race
any celebrity face
above the fold
bold type
news makes our blood boil,
our gray matter darker
our humor disappear
human interest lost
minus the human
and the interest...
 and yet
 news tells a story
 to God be the glory!
 Sometimes.

It's a summer ritual for me to do one sermon on "Religion in the News." We have a class with that title, every Sunday, September through June, and I've been doing it for 40 years. It began simply enough. When I was a pastor in Melrose, Massachusetts, we had a weekly Bible Study, as we do here, and people would show up early and the conversation quickly started: "did you see that on the news?" "Did you read about this or that in the paper?" "Have you seen this weeks' Time Magazine?" And usually, the stories they were citing pertained to religion. Years later, while a pastor in the Berkshires, I had a weekly radio show, "Religion in the News." I invited a Rabbi to join me and each week I'd bring in five or six news articles that had

to do with religion, some obvious, some more subtle, but all of them begging for discussion.

I turned that idea into a summer sermon for two reasons. First, to plug my “Religion in the News” class for September, wet your appetite, pique your interest. Maybe you’ll join us. Second, to get you in the habit, to open your eyes, to see the world of religion referenced all around you, literally everywhere. Front pages, like several recent Supreme Court rulings. Sports page. Alida told you about the CT Post article on the vibrant Christian faith of Paige Bueckers and Ice Brady, two UConn superstar basketball players. Let’s face it, that’s a powerful Christian witness across the state of Connecticut and the sports world everywhere. When I tell you to pray often, read the Bible daily, go to church regularly and it will help you in life, you nod nicely, you expect me to say stuff like that. Heck, I get paid to say it. But when Paige Bueckers and Ice Brady say it, that grabs people. Yes, that’s “religion...in the news,” front and center, in a positive light.

Our scripture for today, not very well-known, but evidently a matter of some interest 2000 years ago, is a good entry into today’s sermon: “Religion in the News.”

There had been a calamity in the village of Siloam, a building had collapsed, killing 18 innocent people. Or were they innocent? Did God cause it? Did they deserve it? There’s the connection to today’s sermon: news plus religion. How did the Disciples know about it? Remember, this is before radio, TV, newspaper, or the internet. But news carries, always has. There’s an old saying, “news spreads fast...bad news spreads faster.”

So, the tragedy in Siloam, the death toll, the news became known all over Israel, and they immediately made a direct link to religion: Did God do it? Why do bad things happen to good people? You bring up a question like that, based on a news story and discussion flies all around the room, lively,

thoughtful, spiritual, personal, practical. In fact, that question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” was one of our “Religion in the News” stories. Obituaries often remind us of religious figures, controversies, heroics. Rabbi Kushner asked that profound question in the title of his huge-selling book, the question that every human being asks at least once in life...or even once a day. Timothy Keller’s death touched a lot of us. He was the legendary New York City pastor who was willing to sit down with anybody, engage with everyone, to allow the Christian Gospel to touch any heart in some way. He brought an intellectual heft, and credibility, to serious Christian engagement with the world.

Pat Robertson’s death, the groundbreaking televangelist and Presidential candidate, gave us the opportunity to think through religion and politics, the advent of mass mailing that transformed religion AND politics, the role of celebrity television preachers, and their scandals. The obituaries also introduce us to, or remind us of saintly nuns, courageous clergy, sacrificial believers who lived lives of enormous love.

And listen to these headlines from the Business pages.

“Intel’s True Believer,” about the CEO of giant chip-maker Intel, and how his Christian faith guides his leadership in tough economic times. (New York Times 02/20/23, p. Bu 1)

“Silicon Valley’s Secret Christians.” (Wall Street Journal 02/01/22, p. A15) which describes hostility toward Christians in the tech world.

“California Catholics Under Attack” (Wall Street Journal, 05/02/23) about vandalism of Catholic holy sites.

And here are three fun titles we looked at this year:

“Jesus Saves, but He’s No Protectionist” (Wall Street Journal, 10/21/22, p. A15)

“Is the Pope Capitalist?” (Wall Street Journal)

“Would Jesus Bet on the Super Bowl?”

People all around the business world are trying to figure out where God and faith and even Christian teaching can help in career, finance, business, profit, work. These are fun, not only for the answers they come up with, but also the lively discussion they engender.

Talking about Jesus’ teachings, Biblical ethics and economic policy turns out NOT to be as dry as it sounds. Jesus’ parables about equity and equality, two of the big hot-button topics of today; and the Bible’s forceful condemnation of economic exploitation and personal business corruption; and even in the idea that since Jesus was big into risk-taking, he’d be OK with sports gambling – well, you can see where the fun starts.

Then there’s the “Arts and Culture” Pages. Who do you listen to for music? How about the Foo Fighters...or Paul Simon? Both brought out new music this spring dealing with death, heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching death, of loved ones, band members....and their own mortality, in what the Foo Fighters themselves called “a brutally honest and emotionally raw response to everything (we have) endured.” Listen to these final words from the song “Rest,” by the Foo Fighters front man, David Grohl, written after the death of his mother and his longtime bandmate:

“Rest. You will be saved now.

Rest. You will be safe now.

You can rest now.”

Paul Simon’s new album even has a clear Biblical title, “Psalms.” With even clearer song titles like “Lord,” and “Forgiveness.” Looking at his own mortality straight in the face, at age 81. He’s celebrating life, embracing faith, acknowledging death, and daring to believe, singing at the end.

“Heaven is beautiful. It’s almost like home,” closing with “Amen, which means “so be it.” This is “religion...in the news...” from rock ‘n’ roll, that is not afraid of faith.

And that’s another underlying reason for my emphasis on looking for religion in the news; or, in fact, religion anywhere. It is affirming when something we hold dear turns out to be treasured by UConn Women basketball players, rock ‘n’ roll royalty, business tycoons, along with us, everyday people. This is what I’m really saying: “Religion in the News” for you can be two things. One, a spiritual discipline. Two, enlightened self-interest.

As a spiritual discipline, these news items, forget whether they’re good or bad, or you agree or disagree, but they get you thinking. Thinking is good for your faith. Get in the habit!

And as enlightened self-interest, well, if you got up in the morning and somebody you loved was on the front page; or there’s an op-ed written against your best friend; or the sports page highlighted your child’s great play in yesterday’s big game; or you were featured in the society pages for chairing a major charity event... you’d want to know, you’d want to read it. And if it was right, you’d want to share it, and if it was wrong, you’d want to correct it. In other words, “religion in the news” is about us! So, we better pay attention.

Probably the religious news item that got the most play this month was the decision by Southern Baptists to thoroughly exclude woman from spiritual leadership. They did so by kicking out several churches with women pastors, and reaffirming their opposition to women elders, what we call “Deacons;” or in any other church role that would put a woman engaged in ministry in charge of men. You can easily get weeks of great discussion out of this one story:

What are Southern Baptists?

How did they get so big?

Why are they in decline?

Why are they so opposed to women in leadership?

And what does it mean to be “called” to be a pastor? What’s more, what is a pastor?

Let’s face it, Christianity and Churches have lost their “pride of place” in America, and we like to blame it on outside forces. Immigration, with so many Muslims and Hindus moving in and not enough Swedish Lutherans and Scottish Presbyterians. Or we blame militant atheists. When the very simple truth is most harm to churches is self-inflicted. See, you could have this headline: “Southern Baptists Growing Sunday Schools by Innovation” or “Southern Baptists Lead America in Helping the Elderly and the Poor.” Or “Southern Baptists Vote to Keep Women in the Kitchen.” You can see why we have fun discussion!

The news items that really get our attention, are on the front page, or lead the evening news, or are the top-trending clickbait on your I-Phone news app. And in the last weeks, that’s all come from the Supreme Court rulings where religion has been the driving force behind most big decisions this year. You can’t overstate how central religious conservatives have been to overturning “Roe Vs. Wade” on abortion rights, winning elections that reshaped the Supreme Court, lobbying and protesting tirelessly for decades, and doing so from the pulpit, the perch, the foundation of mostly Christian religion. Religion was even clearer in last week’s rulings.

A United States postal worker from Pennsylvania won his case, “claiming he was forced to leave his job after he received warnings and suspensions for refusing to work Sundays” so he could follow his Christian faith’s teaching about Sabbath rest, going to church, not working on

Sundays. “He alleged the (Postal Service) discriminated against him by failing to approve his religious accommodation to not be scheduled on Sundays.” (New York Post, 06/30/23, p. 8-9). In other words, businesses must provide “reasonable accommodation” for a person’s religious belief, allowing people to switch shifts with other workers, or be absent on worship days and not be punished. This one ruling gives us room for discussing the old “blue laws,” the Ten Commandments, work, and, of course, the very nature of “Sabbath.”

Another ruling, at the State Court level, allows for thoroughly religion-based Charter schools, this one in Oklahoma. For some time, tax dollars have been used for religious schools, for matters like transportation, and various support systems, counseling, therapies, programs not of a religious nature but needed by students. And some states are allowing tax-based vouchers for parents to use for school-choice, whether religious or private. But “Charter Schools” are public schools, and the Oklahoma ruling is the first to allow public school funds to go for religious instruction in religious schools.

Look what we have here:

Separation of church and state, the whole “Charter School” debate, tangential issues of accountability, teachers’ unions, tax dollars.

Another big religion-based ruling supported a Christian graphic artist website designer who refused to design websites for gay couples. She claimed she was being forced to support gay marriage which her kind of Christianity opposed. Nowadays, couples getting married like to have a website devoted to their upcoming wedding. I imagine photos, the invitation, wish list, honeymoon plans, engagement events, maybe even a photo of me scaring the daylights out of them with pre-marital counseling! But the website designer claimed that forcing her to promote gay weddings violates her free speech rights and discriminates against her based on her religious beliefs. The counter argument is that she, a business open to the

public, is violating the right of a gay couple for the sole reason that they are gay and getting married: two legal activities.

Try parsing that one!

Individual rights, free speech, gay marriage, artistic freedom, public vs. private.

I'm old enough to remember Lester Maddox, in 1964, standing on the front porch of his Pickwick restaurant, holding an axe handle signifying to Black people, "heck no, you can't come in here." Fifty-nine years later we're back to the same place. Public is public for only some of the public.

I already have your head spinning, don't I?! That is half of the fun of "religion in the news." Speaking of which, let's end with one of two fun ones or at least not so heavy.

Here's from the Boston Globe, just last month, "Can AI Preach a Good Sermon?" AI, Artificial Intelligence. At a Lutheran Church conference in Bavaria, Germany, they had an entire worship service, 40 minutes, the whole kit and kaboodle of worship, prayers, music, sermon, benediction created by "Artificial Intelligence," AI, a "chatbot." And there were "long lines outside the church waiting to get in, an hour before church," it was reported. Once inside, the worship was led by four avatars, artificially created video figures. Some people loved it, especially the ingenuity of it. Some hated it, commenting "there was no heart and no soul...no emotions...monotonous." And some figured it's the future, "deal with it." (Boston Globe, 06/11/23, p. A12)

Well...? That one gets to the core quickly, for sure.

What IS a church?

What IS worship?

What is real? Necessary?

Fifty years from now, this old church could be a background movie set for you, sitting at your desk in your pajamas with a cup of coffee, listening to two blue-haired avatars. Oh, let's call them "D" and "A," present computer-generated sermons based on archival sermon and audio recordings of long-ago pastors.

One last article, sweet, quite deep, actually. I saved it for today, from the New York Times Christmas Eve edition (12/24/22, p. A19) titled "Why Jesus Loved Friendship." The author, Pete Wehner, served in the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and the younger George Bush. He cites Jesus' extraordinary statement to the Disciples, and therefore to us. "You are my friend if you do what I command. I no longer call your servants. Instead, I have called you my friend." This was not new theology, God called Abraham "my friend." Then with Jesus, the idea of true friendship with God, between us and Christ with one another really took off. That's why we sing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Quoting friends of his, this op-ed writer, (yes, this was a New York Times Op-Ed!) he writes, "As friends of Jesus we love one another, and that includes people different from us. In fact, no one can be the "other." Because in Christ we belong to one another" (Renee Notkin). "If the church claims to be the community of the friends of Jesus, it must engage in Christ-like friendship, toward all people, particularly those who have been and are marginalized."

Remember, this isn't from another long essay by me, or some harangue sermon by me, or an AI generated sermon from an avatar. This is a lifelong political careerist writing an Op-Ed in the New York Times.

Religion is News.

That, in itself, is big news.

Don't skip over it.

