



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA
12 Pentecost – Proper 15 - Year C –
August 18/19, 2007

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Ps. 82; Hebrews
12: 1-7 (8-10) 11-14; Luke 12:49-56

Preacher:

The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

Over the years I have been a real fan of CNN's Chief International correspondent Christiane Amanpour. Beginning at 9:00 PM on Tuesday of this week, CNN will air a three-part series developed by Christiane Amanpour titled *God's Warriors*. On Tuesday night, she will focus on Judaism. On Wednesday night, she will focus on Islam and on Thursday night, she will focus on Christianity.¹ Each segment will be two hours long.

The material available on the internet promoting the three-part special indicates that the segment on Judaism will pay particular attention to the Jewish Settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, on places such as Hebron.² The section on Islam will pay particular attention to the emergence of Islamic militant fundamentalism in the Middle East. Some of this segment was filmed in Cairo.³ On Thursday night, Amanpour will turn her attention to Christianity....Her segment *will not* be taped in Jerusalem, site of the Crusades...She *will not* go to Bethlehem, where a tiny Christian remnant is barely hanging to existence. She *will not* be in Bosnia-Herzegovina or in Nigeria where Muslims and Christians are equally divided and where there is great tension.

Instead, Amanpour and her crew will be reporting from the United States. They will be exploring the rise of Christian Conservatism in the United States and analyzing what has been labeled

“the culture wars.”⁴ In this Christian segment, Amanpour will explore a variety of recent expressions and trends within American Christianity.

One of her profiles will be of Pastor Gregory Boyd and Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul's Minnesota where Boyd is Pastor. The Church is a so-called “mega-church” and has an average Sunday attendance of 5000.⁵ A graduate of Yale Divinity School and Princeton Theological Seminary, Boyd created quite a stir in Christian Conservative Evangelical circles during the last election year. A story that appeared in The New York Times on June 30⁶ a year ago reported the story as follows:

“Like most pastors who lead thriving evangelical mega-churches, the Rev. Gregory A. Boyd was asked frequently to give his blessing — and the church's — to conservative political candidates and causes. The requests came from church members and visitors alike: Would he please announce a rally against gay marriage during services? Would he introduce a politician from the pulpit? Could members set up a table in the lobby promoting their anti-abortion work? Would the church distribute “voters' guides” that all but endorsed Republican candidates? And with the country at war, please couldn't the church hang an American flag in the sanctuary?”⁷

“After refusing each time,” The New York Times report states, *“Mr. Boyd finally became fed up...Before the last presidential election, he preached six sermons called ‘The Cross and the Sword’ in which he said the church should steer clear of politics, give up moralizing on sexual issues, stop claiming the United States as a “Christian nation” and stop glorifying American military campaigns. ‘When the church wins the culture wars, it inevitably loses,’ Mr. Boyd preached. ‘When it conquers the world, it becomes the world. When you put your trust in the sword, you lose the cross.’”*

Boyd is very concerned about the polarization of our society and is adamant in believing that the notion of having a “Christian” nation is wrong-thinking. Like St. Paul's in Delray Beach, Woodland Hills Church is made up of people of all political stripes. Beneath the name of the Church on their church sign, it says “Tearing Down Walls.”⁸ In Thursday's Christian segment of *God's Warriors*, Christiane Amanpour will profile Pastor Gregory Boyd and Hillside Church in St. Paul's, Minnesota.

In that same segment, Amanpour will also profile Ron Luce who is the founder of a national teen ministry movement called “Acquire the Fire” and who, as a part of the *Acquire the Fire*⁹ ministry, has created an event that is going around the nation and into Canada and Mexico called “*BattleCry!*”¹⁰

Amanpour and her production crew caught up with Ron Luce at a Battle Cry event at AT&T Park in San Francisco...Luce is filmed in front of a crowd of 22,000 screaming teenagers and adults shouting out to the crowd, “Whoever speaks up the most gets to shape the culture...I'm looking at a whole army of young people who want to shape the culture...”¹¹

Amanpour reports, “*BattleCry is made up of ...Christian Conservatives armed with their faith and prepared for battle in perhaps the most liberal city in America, ready to fight, what are to them the evils of secular society and pop culture: sex, drugs, violence and pornography on the airwaves, the internet and in video-games.*” “*They are,*” Amanpour states, “*God's Warrior's for Jesus.*”¹² Luce says to that crowd of 22,000, and I am sure to every Battle Cry crowd he speaks in front of, “*We are hear to stage a reverse rebellion, We are here to rise up, to reject the pop culture and recreate it with the creativity that God has given us.*” Luce refers to his opponents in American culture as “*Virtual Terrorists.*”¹³

Luce's movement is strong and growing....He

has a significant following, and especially among young people.... There is a *BattleCry* website.” Of course, Luce has his opponents, those who see in him a person who is trying to impose a strident Christian agenda and, perhaps even, a Christian theocracy on American society, threatening freedom of speech and freedom of choice.¹⁴

I intend to watch all three segments of *God’s Warriors*, confident that it will be important, informative and thought-provoking... Having explored some of the material on the internet, I am already thinking and asking questions....

I find myself challenged by Boyd and Woodland Hills.... He urges the church not to be “political,” but what happens when the “political” is profoundly moral, when the “political” issues are about justice, for example, which is a central theological category. Are racism and war and poverty and adequate access to health care for all people merely a matter of politics? Or are they also matters of justice that are of concern to God and that demand the attention and action of God’s people? Is the community of faith and its leaders to stay silent on these vitally important issues?

While I believe that there should be a clear separation of Church and State, and while I agree with author and Sojourner’s Magazine publisher Jim Wallis, that “God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat,”¹⁵ with Wallis, I also believe that people of faith, and especially leaders, have an obligation and responsibility to speak up and make their voices heard on important societal issues. The voices of people of faith need to be heard in the public square.

Having said this I am, nonetheless, challenged by Ron Luce and his *BattleCry* events... I find myself in agreement with a lot of the concerns that Luce has about our culture and especially, how our culture is

preying upon young children and youth. I believe the church has a responsibility to be vocal and to speak out against all of this, and even to take action... Despite this, however, I find Luce’s methods and militaristic rhetoric and imagery inflammatory and his stridency more than a little frightening....

What is to prevent this verbal warfare and militant imagery today, from emerging into real violence and actual civil warfare in years to come? How does our faith tradition guide us in these questions? What does Scripture have to say?

Sadly, today’s Gospel reading isn’t very helpful. *“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”* (Luke 12:49) Jesus says at the beginning of today’s Gospel... *“I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”* (Luke 12:50-51). Jesus doesn’t stop there, he continues, *“From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law”* (Luke 12:52-53). It is incendiary language. I wish Jesus hadn’t said it... I wish it weren’t in the Gospel.

The language of today Gospel reading is the language of exaggeration; it is the language of hyperbole used rhetorically to make a point. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and he is speaking with some urgency.... His face is turned toward Jerusalem.... Jerusalem and the cross (See Luke 9:51).... And he knows that this will be a time of crisis and decision for those who follow him.

As preacher and scholar Fred Craddock has noted in his commentary on this passage in Luke,

“Crisis does not mean emergency, but that moment of truth and decision about life.... To be placed in the situation of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal or value means to turn away from another.... According to these sayings,” Craddock writes, *“God is so acting toward the world in Jesus of Nazareth that a crisis is created, that is to say, Jesus is ‘making a difference,’ even within families. Peace in the sense of the status quo is now disrupted....”*¹⁶

Well, okay, but how disrupted is this peace? More important, how are people to behave toward one another in the midst of this disruption?

Words like those spoken in today’s Gospel reading are easily misunderstood, twisted and distorted. Removed from their context, they can be used for evil purposes. Because they are attributed to Jesus, they give license to appalling attitudes and behaviors.... We need to be very careful with these words, if we use them at all.... Perhaps, we even need to repudiate them.

They do seem, after all, to contradict other words spoken by Jesus. Think of the Great Commandment, for example “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and... love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31). Jesus words in today’s Gospel reading don’t seem to be in the same spirit as his words in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbors and hate your enemies, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). How are we to weigh all this? What are we to do with these seemingly inconsistent thoughts and contradictory ideas?

I think the answers to these questions are critically important.... The trends of polarization that have been established and continue to be fueled within our nation and within the Christian faith and even the

Episcopal Church can only lead to ever increasing anger and deeper bitterness if we are not intentional and deliberate in countering this trend.

To be sure, we all have feelings, we all have opinions, we all have convictions, strong convictions....And I believe that our faith demands us to be clear about these convictions both personally and publicly, both in what we say and in what we do.

Nonetheless, we must never forget that we are all made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26-27). We are called to honor that reality and to honor one another even when we disagree. The mission of the Episcopal Church as stated in The Book of Common Prayer is to restore all people to unity with God and with each other and in Christ (BCP Outline of the Faith p. 855).

We must be uncompromising in promoting a radical Gospel of love to a world where hatred and anger and bitter division is too often the norm....As today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews urges, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

This past Tuesday, the Church calendar called for the observance of the lesser feast of Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Jonathan Myrick Daniels was a white seminarian enrolled at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.¹⁷ In March of 1965 he heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. call for people of all races to join in the civil rights struggle....Jonathan responded by going to Alabama as a non-violent protester in the march on Selma. He was arrested during the demonstration. Soon after the arrest, he and three others, including Ruby Sales, a 17 year old African-American woman, were released and set free alone and in danger.¹⁸

The group of four started to enter a small grocery store when they were encountered by a man holding a shot-gun who cursed out Ruby Sales,

threatening her with the gun...Jonathan pushed her out of the way, just as the man fired the gun....The blast hit Jonathan in the stomach and killed him....It also injured a Roman Catholic priest who was with the group. Ruby Sales was knocked down but not injured by the blast....Today she runs an organization in Washington, D.C. called Spirit House which promotes justice and reconciliation and racial and gender equality.¹⁹

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Jesus says in today's Gospel reading. The witness of Jonathan Myrick Daniels is a concrete example of how that kind of division can be brought forward with love and courage and in keeping with the Great Commandment to love....To me, Jonathan Myrick Daniels exemplifies what the Christian witness should look like.... *"Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord,"* it says in today's reading from Hebrews." That's what Jonathan Myrick Daniels was doing....

As I watch Christiane Amanpour's special, *God's Warriors* beginning this Tuesday, I expect to be challenged... I am sure I will struggle with a lot of the images I see and lot of the things I hear...I hope you will watch and struggle too....

But as you watch and are challenged, as you struggle, I also hope you will think with me of people like Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, of Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day and so many, many others, countless throngs of saints...I hope you will remember that we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, by those who in their generations all through Christian history, had the courage of their convictions, who ran with perseverance the race that was set before them (Hebrews 12:1)...Men and woman who fought the good fight and finished their races (2 Timothy 4:7),

never losing their integrity, never compromising with evil, repudiating hatred and violence and never forsaking love. Above all, it is my fervent prayer and hope and longing that we may all be one in their company today and tomorrow and always to the greater honor and glory of God in Christ Jesus.

¹ See *God's Warriors* on the CNN Website at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2007/gods.warriors/>
² *God's Warriors*
³ *God's Warriors*
⁴ *God's Warriors*
⁵ For information about Woodland Hills, visit their website at http://www.whchurch.org/content/page_1.htm
⁶ See Goodstein, Laurie "Disowning Conservative Politics, Pastor Rattles Flock" *New York Times*, June 30, 2006 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/30/us/30pastor.html?ei=5088&partner=rssny>

⁷ Goodstein
⁸ See Woodland Hills Church website at http://www.whchurch.org/content/page_3.htm
⁹ See "Acquire the Fire" website at <http://www.acquirethefire.com/>
¹⁰ See "BattleCry" website at <http://www.battlecry.com/>
¹¹ *God's Warriors*
¹² *God's Warriors*
¹³ *God's Warriors*
¹⁴ *God's Warriors*
¹⁵ Wallis, Jim *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco,2005).
¹⁶ Craddock, Fred B *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke* (Knoxville, John Knox Press, 1990) p. 166
¹⁷ See "Jonathan Myrick Daniels" in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007)
¹⁸ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*
¹⁹ See Spirit House website at <http://www.spirithouseproject.org/>

