

# A NEW GOSPEL

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, October 11, 2015

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **The Ump Called an Out He Couldn't See**

I'd like to begin by telling you about one of the more profound misjudgments I've ever made. A number of years ago, I was asked if I would be umpire number two for an IBM softball game. They had the ump behind home plate, but apparently the one who should have been out in right field helping with those judgment calls was a no-show.

Asked if I would fill in for that guy, I helpfully but mistakenly said, "Yes."

And so, in the middle of the game, there's a runner already on first base with a lead toward second base. I'm standing between first and second, just barely on the grass in the outfield.

The batter at home plate smacks the next pitch sharply, a grounder right at me, and he is running hard to first base.

Now the first baseman, who is basically just a little to my left, slides over to his right to be ready to field the ball right in front of me.

However, the runner from first is heading fast toward second, trying to pass behind the first baseman, who is facing home plate to catch the oncoming ball.

There's sure to be a collision.

Suddenly the ball arrives at the line between first and second. The first baseman fields it perfectly and swings around to his left in order to make the tag on the runner coming

from first. Anticipating this move, the runner is ready with his own move.

In a split second, four of us are all in a straight line of sight between me and home plate:

- First, there I am, facing home plate and looking at the back of the runner.
- Then there's the runner, also facing home plate and doubled over in the shape of a big letter C so that the first baseman will miss tagging the runner's midsection.
- Next comes the first baseman, facing away from home plate and looking at the runner with the ball in hand ready to make the tag.
- Finally there's the home-plate umpire peering distantly at the back of the first baseman.

## **The Irony of the Situation**

The moment of truth is that I'm the one charged with making the call, but I'm the only one who can't see it!

Think about that for a moment. The runner's back was blocking my view of the tag. Even the umpire at home plate couldn't see the tag because the first baseman's back was blocking *his* view and he was too far away in any case.

In all, there were 50-some people there, including players and spectators, who could have seen the tag *if* it had occurred.

Then, in a display of certainty like a good umpire, I took a guess and called the runner **OUT!**

### **Never Change Your Mind; Just Call It**

Immediately, both sides go into a frenzy, the first baseman's team in utter joy, the runner's team in utter disgust.

Now there's a cardinal rule of being an official: *Never* change your mind! *Never* back down!

You're *sure* you saw it! You *know* what happened! And you're callin' it like it is!

*Except I couldn't see it.*

I made a lot of enemies that day and no friends. Half the group thought I was a fool, and the other half hated me. I'm convinced that I blew the call. I called the guy out, but obviously, judging by the reaction of everybody else, the runner had managed to avoid the tag.

Unfortunately, the first baseman, having missed the tag, just stopped and began arguing with me for calling the runner out right then and there.

Meanwhile the runner races on to second base, the guy who hit the ball has arrived safely at first, and the first baseman is stickin' his finger in my face, arguin' with me. He could have thrown the ball to second and gotten the runner out that way.

Alas, the moral of this story is never volunteer to be an umpire.

### **Perception Has a Tenuous Relationship With Reality; Where Is God in Disasters?**

The lesson didn't dawn on me at the time, of course, although it has to do with the nature of perception versus reality. We have our

perception, or what we understand to be true from our point of view, but that has a tenuous relationship with reality.

Now let me read a couple paragraphs from Diana Butler Bass, a modern church historian who wrote a recent book called *Grounded: Finding God in the World*. She's promoting the book, and I came across an interview that packs a lot into two little paragraphs. She's asking the question, "Where is God?" This is often thought of as a child's question, but it's really more than that.

Actually it's not a bad question for adults to ask in the wake of such events as mass killings in Roseburg, Aurora, and Sandy Hook; the World Trade Center collapse; people drowning in New Orleans, dying from Ebola, tortured by terrorists, murdered for the crime of being different; or being lost at sea in the disappearance of an airliner.

"Where is God in all this mayhem?" So, being a historian, Bass offers up an old answer:

"For centuries, most religions taught that God was in heaven. There existed a three-tiered universe with God at the top in heaven with the angels, us muddling about here on earth, and Satan and the demons below in hell, always presenting the possibility of eternal punishment. Heaven was far away, and the God who lived there was an inaccessible divinity, a king, ruler, master, judge, or father. Therefore, that God needed mediators."

Get a load of this list. There were:

"Mediators such as Jesus, Mary, the saints, the church, prophets, preachers, sacraments, dogma, commandments, rules, and rituals to communicate with us that we might learn and do what is good and right and holy while we're muddling around at this middle level. The distant God served

as a cornerstone for much of western religious life and provided untold millions through the ages with meaning and comfort.”

### **The Old Worldview of God and Heaven, Satan and Hell Is Dead; Good Riddance**

Bass continues the interview by saying that this old worldview is simply no longer satisfactory. Part of the evidence against this old-fashioned answer is that all of us sort of raise an eyebrow when we hear that kind of thing, even though we still manage to accept such decrepit nonsense in our music, in our liturgy, in countless places in the Bible where we think of God as up there and hell as down there. We still have that ancient view almost hardwired within us.

Another piece of evidence against the old view is that churches have been on the decline for nearly all of our generation. Yet the decline is among people leaving church who still believe in God, just not *that* god. They’re spiritual but not religious.

### **The Question Goes Begging**

What’s wrong with the old worldview? Why is it unsatisfactory? Why are we rejecting it?

There are lots of answers, and personally I could go on for a long time into many of them, but I’d like to hone in on one central outlook, one big answer to the dissatisfaction we have with the worldview of the past, and that answer comes in one verb or adjective, “separate” or, to use it in another way, “separate” or “separation.”

You have God, humans, and hell on three different outmoded levels. You have a powerful distinction, a huge gulf of separation between spiritual and worldly spiritual and physical, spiritual and fleshy.

We have the good and the bad and the mixture in between. What’s good for the spider is bad for the fly.

We have a notion of cosmic distinctions between the factors that comprise our world. And these cosmic separations then give legitimacy to the thousand other separations that we experience in our world between the genders, between classes of people, regardless of how you might classify them. Educational level? How much money do you make? Are you a landowner or not? What race are you? What are your hobbies?

### **Your Career: Growth Versus Decline**

I’ve had two very sad conversations over lunch with other clergy. One was in his last week of work, and he reminded me of another one a year ago. Both stories sort of tugged at my heart. Both clergy had recently announced their retirements, and we were talking about that.

(I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is “No, you’re not that lucky.”)

The one last week had just seen “Steve Jobs,” the movie, and he was wistfully reflecting, sort of talking out loud about what it would be like to spend your career in a business that just grew and grew and grew. So you started off in a garage with an idea, and you end up with a multinational corporation that’s one of the biggest in the world, with untold gobs of money parked everywhere.

And then he thought, “You know, it’s just like I spent my entire career in an organization in which each year brought a little more of a decline than the previous year. You tend to notice it more on a decade level. Each decade falls off a little more than the past decade.”

As you all know, I'm at least half Presbyterian. When I moved here in 1990, there were 60-some Presbyterian churches, and now there are 40-some churches of that denomination 25 years later. Not quite one church a year closed its doors. At this rate you sort of tolerate it, but when you retire and look back and reflect, there is a certain sadness to it.

That conversation reminded me of the one a year earlier with a different minister who also recently retired. I don't remember much of that conversation except for one little snippet in which he said, "Working for the church is sort of like working for Smith-Corona." You get the picture. The only place you see typewriters any more is at antique shows or museums.

Two sad conversations. Those are perspectives, but are they reality? For me, that's the 64-dollar question. You know they're legitimate perspectives. You can't argue with that; it's from another point of view. But how true is it? How rooted is that viewpoint compared to reality? And what is reality anyway?

### **End of the Old Worldview; A Fresh Idea in Inherent Unity**

The reality that I would like to share with you, my perspective, is that the core gospel — the message from the old worldview that's being rejected — well, there are some fatal flaws in it, and the major flaw is that things are separate.

I'd like to offer that idea, an inherent unity, not separation — you just simply word the same thing in a negative way versus a positive way — is closer to our reality. There are lots of different metaphors for which we can try to grasp a feeling. The church

might be shedding its skin like a snake in order to emerge and grow in a different way. We might be in such a stage right now, in this last generation, of pupating prior to emerging as a new and glorious butterfly.

They say that it's always darkest right before dawn. Every woman pretty much knows that there's a really painful time just prior to childbirth. Phyllis Tickle, who died a couple weeks ago, talked about the need that the church has for a rummage sale every few years, when it gets rid of some of the trash that has accumulated.

Not separation but rather an inherent unity. Virtually every academic discipline is telling the church that message. Almost every discipline except theology. In physics, quantum mechanics has been saying it for a century now, and we still have trouble hearing it. In biology, both cellular biology and evolutionary biology are saying the same thing. All of the ecological disciplines are also singing the same song, that we are all interconnected. Psychology. Even math is promoting that same core idea of inherent unity.

We — those of us who are entertaining this radical, and in many ways heretical, idea, at least compared to the old worldview — we are on the leading edge of a wave. The leading edge of a wave *never* has much weight behind it. It never has many numbers behind it. The numbers come in the weight of the wave, which is a little farther down the beach. It's coming, but it's not on the leading edge.

### **No Separation, Inherent Oneness; It's a New Gospel, Rooted in the Old One**

But the old one got twisted around a lot. There is a new gospel in the inherent oneness

of all creation, spiritual and physical. One of the cool things about this new gospel — take this seriously — is that it cannot be used to foster guilt. It simply cannot be coopted for war. And note as well that it can be a catalyst for health in every dimension of humanity: mental health, spiritual health, physical health, emotional health. What a list! That simply can't be used for guilt. Can't be used to engender war. And it is a catalyst for health.

A new gospel:

- The magnitude of it is hard to imagine.
- The profundity of it is hard to feel.
- The magnificence of it is blinding.
- It is a different way of conceiving where God is.

I'd like to conclude with a quote that was given to me this morning. (This is actually proof that I never really have my sermon done on time.) It's from Buckminster Fuller (under Hymn 346 in our hymnal):

*For God, to me, it seems, is a verb;  
not a noun, proper or improper:  
Is the articulation not the art? —  
Is loving not the abstraction of love?*

*Yes, God is a verb — the most active;  
connoting the vast harmonic  
reordering of the universe  
from unleashed chaos of energy.*

Actually, I'm sort of excited about the depth and range of the New Gospel.

*Amen.*