

SINCERELY-HELD RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, March 2, 2014

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

As most people know, the Arizona State Legislature recently passed legislation, subsequently vetoed by Governor Jan Brewer, that had to do with the notion of sincerely-held religious beliefs. This could then have influenced the way in which we do business. An example that has been discussed in hundreds of editorials is about a person who has a sincerely-held religious belief that a gay marriage is sinful and therefore this person doesn't want to be made to serve a gay couple who, for example, might want to hire a wedding photographer or employ somebody to bake the wedding cake.

This idea has launched a huge number of editorials, and I've read about a dozen of them. Such legislation is of course very ill-advised. It begs the question of what a sincerely-held religious belief really is. Who is going to decide whether it's sincere or not? Because a sizeable portion of our country is spiritual but not religious, would it cover sincerely-held beliefs whether or not they're religious? And there's the cardinal rule of all legislation: Is it enforceable?

I chuckled at the possibility of bringing clergy into the courtroom as expert witnesses on sincerely-held religious beliefs.

**What Religious Beliefs
Would You Hold Close?**

In any event, the legislation was vetoed by the governor and now it appears to have gone away, at least for a while. But in the course of following the news and pondering this issue, it occurred to me that I'm not certain what my own sincerely-held religious beliefs are. If I were asked what it is that I hold near and dear to my heart, I'm not sure I would be able to answer, at least not without thinking about it for a while. And so I did think about it for a while.

I would like to share with you what these beliefs are. They are my pearls, the notions that are extraordinarily valuable to me. They are my pearls of great value. So for the sermon this morning, I would like to offer them to you. What is it that we believe, for which we are willing to sacrifice? What is it that we believe deeply enough and strongly enough that we would rather hold onto those beliefs than our reputation or perhaps our freedom? Would we be willing to be jailed for such beliefs? What is it that we really hold onto deeply?

These are my pearls. These are the ones for which I'm willing to sacrifice myself.

**Among the Pearls of My Belief,
Number One Is Love**

There's a reason love is my number-one pearl of belief. (There are eight of these.) Jesus said it ought to be number one for

everybody. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: This is the first commandment. And the second is namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” He didn’t make that up; he was quoting it from the Hebrew scriptures. Love is number one. He also said something very rare, which he never said again about anything else. “On these two commandments hang all of the law and the prophets.”

Ponder that for a moment. It’s a lot of law and a lot of prophets. Pages and pages of law and prophets, all distilled, all crystalized into a very simple pair – love God, love your neighbor. And the words heart, soul, mind, and strength? In a number of ways, they really say that with the whole of your being – your physical being, your emotional being, your intellectual being, your spiritual being – love with the whole of who you are. That’s number one.

Number Two Is not so Much a Belief as Behavior

My number two pearl is equally important from a behavioral point of view, from the practical side. This is the Golden Rule. It’s one of the few laws, so to speak, that’s found in all the world religions – in the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; in Hinduism and Buddhism; in the earth-based religions of paganism and wicken. It is generally believed by the average atheist, and it is universally believed to be the sterling example of ethics.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It’s not negotiable. It’s a great

rule. Living by it would bring peace on earth in a matter of hours. So my first two pearls are love and the Golden Rule.

Number 3 Is the Notion of Sacrament – the Divine Touches the Human

For example, there are sacraments of holy communion or baptizing a baby, or sacramental services like ordination, marriage, or last rites for somebody about to pass on. These are about consistent holy ways in which the infinite touches the finite, in which the spiritual touches the physical, in which the divine touches the human.

The Greek expression for times when divinity touches humanity is that it is always viewed as a mystery. How is it that God incarnates, for example? Or how is it that Jesus says, “This is my body”? So it was a mystery when divinity touches humanity, and the word in Greek was “mysterion” or “mystery.” Then, when the Greek text was translated into Latin for the Vulgate Bible, the word chosen to translate “mysterion” was “sacramentum,” from which we get the word “sacrament.”

All this really means is those times when divinity touches humanity. The spiritual infuses the physical.

Number Four Is Communication Between the Divinity and Humanity

Jesus prayed, in John 17, for something that I consider my fourth pearl, my fourth strongly-held religious belief. So far, you’ve got love, the Golden Rule, and sacraments and mysteries. The Fourth one is that there is communication. This is not communication among inanimate things that

occurs every once in a while when their orbits come near or touch each other.

Instead, there is communication between the divinity and humanity.

Jesus prayed that we might become one, even as Jesus and God the Father are one. His goal, his desire, his prayer was that there should be oneness throughout the world – oneness between people, oneness between people and nature, oneness between people and God. A profound oneness.

The means for that communication – not exclusivity but powerful means for it – is communication such that God speaks to us, we learn how to listen, we speak to God, we learn how to pray, and God listens. The communication between divinity and humanity goes back and forth. So love, Golden Rule, sacrament, prayer, communication.

Number Five Is the Perpetual Persistence of Life

The next two have to do with the major holidays of our faith. (There are eight of my pearls.) We have now entered into the season of Lent, and Lent leads us up to the Resurrection – Easter. So my fifth pearl is life. It's one of those places where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." One of his statements, a very definitive one, is that God is life. Resurrection is totally within God's skill set. Death does not hold the final say on anything.

Another way of looking at death is through the eyes of science, through the eyes of physics, through the eyes of biology, and particularly through the eyes of evolution. That is, life is everywhere in our world. In

an indescribably powerful way, one can change any facet of the environment, change any environmental niche, and life finds a way to fill it again. Change it again; life fills it again.

One of the most profound thoughts I've ever come across regarding the notion of Easter and resurrection is we are taught, generally speaking, that people live and then they die. That's the natural course of things. People are born, they're given life by their parents, they live for a while, and then they die. However, the theology of Easter, of Resurrection, simply turns that thought around in a very subtle but powerful way.

For the particular, yes, that simplistic idea is true. But for the mass, for the whole of God's creation, it's the other way around. You die, and that's followed by life. Every death is followed by more life. That is an equation for God, according to Christ. That God fathered the "I am" of Moses' time is life. And now we see the power of the Resurrection model, of the Easter way of thinking.

Number Six Is Incarnation Through Resurrection

Similarly, one more pearl in my bag of beliefs is incarnation. In the same way that the Easter story is archetypal, it's not just that Jesus was the one to be resurrected but rather, in an archetypal, analogous, metaphorical kind of way, life follows every death in God's world. Jesus was not the only incarnation of God. Instead, spirit incarnates into flesh on a regular basis. That is what each and every one of us is – an

incarnation. Deep inside is a spirit that happens to have a body for a while.

As one of the Popes said about twenty years ago, we're not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience. But once again, archetypally, spirit into flesh. You can see the linkage of this idea to the notion of the sacrament – the divinity touching the physical. Spirit incarnating into flesh all the time.

Christ was a supreme example of this but not exclusively. He was an example that was manifest, that was explained to us, that was shown to be the way it is. But it was for the purpose of having us look at ourselves, look at our neighbor, our spouse, our children, our schoolmates, our business partners. Having looked at the neighbor you might say that he also is incarnate, which means that he also is made in the image and likeness of God. He too is a child of God.

These concepts are all linked together.

Number Seven Is the Idea that Whoever Would Be Great Must Serve

So now we have love, the Golden Rule, sacrament, communication and prayer, life and resurrection, and incarnation. My next pearl is a little bit different. It's practical rather than theological. It is the notion that he or she who would be great must learn to serve.

For me this is one of the most profound teachings of the Bible. It's found a handful of times throughout the New Testament and in the Old Testament as well. Explicitly. Implicitly, it runs throughout the entire

story. Jesus, Prince of Peace, king of the world, was also the one to come and serve. To heal and heal some more. Then teach and converse with people. He could be reigning from on high, and he could be dictating to his servants. But no.

This is instead the nature of what loving humanity really is. It's bending down and taking a towel, a basin of water, and washing one another's feet. An archetypal example yet again. It's not that we need to wash everybody's feet. It is instead that we need to serve each other in whatever way emerges at the time. In whatever way service is needed at the time. It is a trope of how to live righteously in our world.

Number Eight Is a Higher Realm, The Gift of Transfiguration

Last after love, Golden Rule, sacrament, communication and prayer, life and resurrection, incarnation, and service is the concept of a higher realm and transfiguration. In my panoply of beliefs, there exists a higher realm, a higher dimension, a higher energy, a higher frequency, a higher vibration. This is the gift of the transfiguration that we see on this Sunday before the season of Lent.

The transfiguration is a bit unusual in that it's worthy of a question: What was its purpose? It didn't heal anybody, it didn't feed anybody, it didn't correct somebody in error. What was it for? What was the purpose of the transfiguration?

So Jesus takes Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of three – and they climb a hill. Then Jesus begins to shine as bright as the

sun. The three disciples see it, and they're overwhelmed. They're not sure how to act. In other words, they act very human about the apparent miracle.

The purpose, I would submit to you, is that Jesus was simply showing them what they already believed, what they already knew, however dimly, that there exists a higher realm. This is visually, palpably, viscerally, the divinity that touches humanity. This is the spirit that incarnates into human flesh. And in an archetypal way once again, as with sacrament, resurrection, and incarnation.

Jesus was not just the "lucky" one when this happened. Instead, he is saying that this is human destiny. This is who we are. Here on the mountain, Jesus tells them who he really is. Not just the body that he happens to have for a while. Similarly, this is who you are.

So these are my strongly-held religious beliefs. These eight. They don't have anything to do with whether I bake a cake for somebody or not. But these are the core aspects of my faith as it has evolved over the decades.

As a sidebar, you might be interested to know the etymology of the word "sincere" in the title of this sermon. It's a bit unusual. The Latin word "sin" means "without," which has found its way into other languages. For example, in Spanish the word for "without" is "sin." And the "cere" in Latin means "wax." So to be sincere is to be without wax.

This had to do with the concept of private correspondence. If you sent a letter to somebody and wanted it to be private, you sealed the letter with wax. You melted some wax on the fold of the paper, and then you stamped the wax with your insignia to seal it. Then nobody could look at your correspondence without breaking the wax seal. Thus, something that's open to be viewed by all, not private in any way but completely open and visible is sincere. Hence, the familiar sign-off "sincerely."

So these are my beliefs that I put out on my table. They are my pearls, and they are valuable to me. I offer them to you this morning as a gift.

Amen.