

# PRINCIPLE MATTERS

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2017

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

## **C**onservative Versus **L**iberal Churches Are at Odds

Two years ago, there was a religious controversy in Arizona that made the religious press. It took place in Fountain Hills, Arizona, an attractive little bedroom community a few miles northeast of the big metropolis of Phoenix. I went on google maps to look at Fountain Hills, which is nestled in a small valley surrounded by the dry Mazatzal mountains.

The controversy was allegedly started by The Reverend David Felten, who is pastor of Fountain United Methodist Church. The cause of his transgression was that the web page for his church carried a statement referring to it as a Progressive Christian Fellowship. Hmm. Sounds suspicious. The good reverend went on to declare that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning community was welcome at the Methodist church.

Ah-ha. It gets worse: He also affirmed that the congregation supports science, of all things. Then the kicker was that the congregation also supported interfaith dialogue!

Now Felten was a known quantity in this small community of around 25,000 souls. It turns out he is also the author of a pretty popular book — not a best-seller, but a pretty popular book called *Living the Questions* with the subtitle *The Wisdom of Progressive*

*Christianity*. So he's known around town for taking a stand for Progressive Christianity.

Still, this wasn't news enough. What made the news was that eight other churches ganged up on the Methodists. The eight other congregations, working in unison, decided to preach for three Sundays in a row, all eight of the preachers delivering sermons on very pointed questions at the same time.

On the appointed Sunday, they were to address the first question, "What is the difference between progressive Christianity and biblical Christianity?" The next Sunday sounded out with, "Does that difference matter in a relativistic age?" The third Sunday blared, "How can a Christian decipher what he or she should believe?"

Having decided to press onward with their counterattack, the eight took on the perceived threat of Progressive Christianity. The pastors hammered home their plan by preparing further questions such as: "Why does it matter that Jesus was born of a virgin?" "Why does it matter that he was bodily resurrected?" "Why does it matter that he says in the gospel of John that he is the only way?"

## **F**CC Is an Unabashedly **P**rogressive Christian Church

So now, on the day of our Annual Meeting, I'd like to make four observations, using this controversy from out West as a springboard.

## FIRST OBSERVATION

We are unabashedly a Progressive Christian church. As a matter of fact, we're proud of it. We believe in a number of things that are at odds with the way in which Christianity has been proclaimed in many places and many times in the past, the notion of being welcoming to the LGBTQ community, for example.

We actually take it a bit further than that. It's not just welcome; rather, we use the word "Affirming" — it's United Church of Christ lingo, meaning that we don't just tolerate it. We don't look the other way. We don't use "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Rather, it's affirmed that this is the way God has created humanity, and it is inherently a good thing.

However, it is seen as radical in a number of circles. We don't have a problem with science, and we also believe that interfaith dialogue is necessary for world peace. So we are a Progressive Christian church.

## **P**rogressive Christianity Versus Biblical Christianity

### SECOND OBSERVATION

Humor me a moment. Let's go back and look at those questions used against the Fountain United Methodist Church. Do you know how, particularly during the election season, the phones are

jammed with polls by callers who want to know your opinion on different matters. You can always tell whose side they're on by the way they word their questions. There's a dishonesty to it that really rankles.

**First question.** "What is the difference between Progressive Christianity and Biblical Christianity?" I mean, seriously? The whole point of Progressive Christianity is its attempt to be a bit more honest about what the Bible is saying. Try integrating Biblical sayings with what's happening in the news and in science, and what's happening in the intellectual movements of our era. It's an attempt to be *more* honest, *more* Biblical.

**Second question.** "Does that difference matter in a relativistic age?" In every age, every culture, there are people who believe in hard absolutes, and then there are relativistic people.

Every age has people of both types. We do not live in a more relativistic age than any other age. To think so goes against the facts, goes against what history has shown throughout the ages.

We don't live in a more relativistic age, and what's insidious about this thought is wording the question that way. It gives you a feeling that we *do* live in a more relativistic age, and maybe we *do* need to go back to the hard basics of Biblical Christianity. People

are led to a specific way of thinking by how the question is worded.

**Third question.** “How can a Christian decipher what he or she should believe?” What caught me on that one is the word “should.” You tell me. I’m standing here with my authoritative slimming robe on.

If you harbor a thought in your mind, and I tell you, “You shouldn’t believe that. Here’s what you ought to believe instead.” Is a human being even capable of doing that? Do authoritative figures have the power to tell you what you should or should not believe?

What I see out in front of me is people who believe what you believe. You take in input, and every now and then, you refine your opinions, but this notion of here’s what you should believe because I said so sort of rankles me. I find it disingenuous. I find it dishonest.

## **T**he Path and Teachings of Jesus Can, Do, and Will Lead

### **THIRD OBSERVATION**

Here are some facets of our church. I wanted to make four observations. One is where a Progressive Christian church came on the scene. Two is I had to take issue with some of the questions propounded by its antagonists,

and I mentioned what a Progressive Christian church we are here in Binghamton.

Let’s do a little backtracking to look at what’s what:

**One** is that we’re bona fide Christians, through and through. We believe that following the path and the teachings of Jesus not only *can* lead, it *does* lead, it *will* lead to a direct connection to the awareness and the experience of sacredness, oneness, and unity of what is. Following those teachings has a connection to an awareness and an experience of the oneness of our world.

**Two.** We also affirm that the teachings of Jesus are but one way. This is a problem for many of us. Not *the* way but *one* of the ways to experience sacredness and oneness, and that therefore we are free to draw from other spiritual traditions of the world.

We are free, without getting our knuckles rapped, to read the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, and any number of other sources, ancient or modern, without punishment, without guilt. We seek community that is inclusive of all people, and I don’t need to repeat for you all the different ways in which humanity is divided.

## **T**he Cathedral Has a Radical Welcome

**Three.** One of the things that’s going around

in a sort of viral fashion on the internet is Coventry Cathedral in England. The great cathedral welcomes visitors with an unexpected message. I love it. Let me read it to you:

“We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, confused, well-heeled or down-at-heel. We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers. We welcome you if you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You’re welcome here if you’re just browsing, just woken up or just got out of prison.

We don’t care if you’re more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury or haven’t been to church since Christmas ten years ago. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet and to teenagers who are growing up too fast.

“We welcome keep-fit moms, football dads, starving artists, tree huggers, latté sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you’re having problems, are down in the dumps, or don’t like organized religion. We’re not keen on it either. We offer welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don’t work, can’t spell, or are here because granny is visiting and wants to come to the cathedral. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both, or neither.

“We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throats as kids, or got lost on the road and

wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters, and you.”

## **P**rogressivity Is a Certain Measure; What We Say Is Uncertain

**Four.** Progressive Christians know that the way we behave, the way we act is the truer, fuller measure of what’s really going on deep inside our minds and hearts. What we say is an uncertain measure of what we believe. Here’s where clergy are always at a disadvantage; we’re talking all the time, not doing much.

**Five.** Progressive Christians find grace in the search for understanding, and we believe that there is more value in questioning than in absolutes. If there is a paranoid fear that Progressive Christians have, it’s of those who have all the answers. We are afraid of rigid minds.

**Six.** We strive for peace and justice among all people and especially between religions and nations. We strive to protect and restore the integrity of the earth, and we commit to a lifelong path of learning, of compassion, and of expressions of love. That’s what Progressive Christians basically believe.

I’ve covered three Observations so far. Number one is our unabashedly Progressive Christian church. Number two is that I had to take issue with the questions set forth in opposition to the Progressive church in Fountain Hills. Number three discusses the broad outlines of what Progressive Christianity is about.

## **S**upport Comes via Checkbooks, Volunteering, Helping Neighbors

### **FOURTH OBSERVATION**

The Fourth and last Observation is that I want to look at one of the points of Progressive Christianity in more detail. It's about the way we act, the way we behave being the fuller expression of what we believe. I want to give you some examples to sort of flesh this out for us. It is said that the best way to look at what people believe and what they think is to look at their checkbooks. What do they support?

The vast majority of you support this church, but what else do you support? Doctors Without Borders? Habitat for Humanity? The Humane Society? Mom's House? And I'm going to bet that at least the greatest number of you support many different things because spending is one of the ways that we act in the world.

A second way is what you do with your volunteer time. I know for a fact that by far the majority of you volunteer. Churches can't run without volunteers. For all the nonprofits that do so much in our community, volunteerism is their backbone. Considering all the good that is done in our world, the lion's share of it is carried out by volunteers, in other words, you

and me. So it's how we spend our money. It's also how we spend our time.

The third way is what we do to help our neighbors. How do we spend our skills, things that we know how to do.

These are all measures of the ways in which we act out what we believe. What's in our mind and what's in our heart, whether it's carpentry or knitting or plumbing or cooking, just simple hand-holding without saying a word, dentistry, listening, all of these kinds of things.

You add it up, the way in which we spend a portion of our money toward the greater good, a portion of our time toward the greater good, some of our skills toward the greater good — all of these are indicators of what's inside our hearts and minds, which leads us back to that first aspect of what Progressive Christianity is all about.

Being bona fide Christians following the path and the teachings of Jesus can lead to awareness and experience of the sacredness and the oneness and the unity of life. It is that awareness, the intellectual side of it and the experiential side of it, the head and the heart, that leads to the conforming of each one of us into the image of Christ, which then leads to the healing of our world. It's so very important for all of us .

*Amen.*