

The Fundamentals: Infallibility

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word:

“The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.” Matthew 12:35

Contemporary Word:

“Fundamentalism is a threat to Christianity not because of the fundamental beliefs themselves, but rather because of the judgement that so often accompanies those beliefs...it is perfectly acceptable to believe Jesus born of a virgin. It is not acceptable to think a person who disagrees with you on the subject is going to hell.”
--Rev. Dr. Gary Cox

“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.”--Gilda Radner

THE FUNDAMENTALS: INFALLIBILITY

In the classic musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, the poor milkman, Tevye, tries to maintain his family and raise his daughters according to the strict rules found in the Torah.

Tevye is a pious and humble man and he tries his best, as each daughter is pulled away from him and into their own future with the men they love. The first daughter, Tzeitel, falls for a tailor, Motel, and this holds the first frustration for Tevye. His wife, Golde, would prefer that Tzeitel marry up in life—to the local butcher, and she is understandably upset when she learns that Tzeitel is in love with a lowly tailor. This

is a brilliant scene in the show, where Tevye creates an elaborate dream sequence where long-dead family members help him convince Golde that it will be okay if Tzeitel marries Motel. There is even more consternation when the next daughter, Hodel declares her love for a revolutionary student, Perchik, and this love story causes further growth for Tevye as he learns that not all new ways of thinking are bad. But the worst is yet to come. When his third daughter, Chava, falls in love with a Russian soldier, not just someone who is not a member of their community but he is also a gentile—not of the Jewish faith. This is a bridge too far for Tevye and he is unable to reconcile his deep faith and belief in the laws of Torah with a daughter who wishes to marry outside the faith. He rends his clothing, declares Chava dead and refuses to ever speak to her again. Of course, in the final scene of the play, we see him still caring for her, praying for and even wishing her Godspeed albeit through his wife, Golde.

For all practical purposes, Tevye is a fundamentalist Jewish man. He believes in the laws of his faith and he applies them to his life judiciously and devoutly. Each daughter tests his faith until finally that faith proves to be unyielding. Or does it? Even though he doesn't speak to Chava at the end, his heart is telling her what he needs to tell her—and I think God cheers at that. What God would punish a human being for loving their child? That seems to me the worst sin ever—to disavow a child over a tenet of faith. I think perhaps the interpretation of the scripture may be a fault? Perhaps?

Too often in our own Christian faith, we run up against this idea of fundamentalism—that there are core beliefs that one must cling to in order to claim being a Christian. But where did these fundamentals come from? And is this a good interpretation of scripture regarding what we should consider as fundamental to our faith?

This month we are looking at “The Fundamentals” here at UCC and exploring if perhaps they missed the mark. Maybe there are other behaviors and attitudes that are more important than these fundamentals. Maybe it’s time for some new fundamentals.

In the early 1900’s a group of theologians, pastors and lay people published a series of booklets they entitled: “The Fundamentals”. They attempted to define what they considered to be the non-negotiable tenets of Christianity—set in stone—the line that can never be crossed—similar to the Apostle’s Creed and other creeds.

These fundamentals are:

The infallibility of scripture

The deity of Jesus of Nazareth

The virgin birth and other miracles surrounding the Christ event

Christ’s substitutionary atonement

The Second Coming

Fundamentalism can be used to describe any religious group that adheres to a strict, literal view of its sacred scriptures. According to many scholars, fundamentalists share the following characteristics:

Religious idealism as the basis for personal and communal identity—on fire for the lord!

The truth is to be revealed and unified;

This truth is intentionally scandalous—that means that outsiders cannot understand it and will always be outsiders—non-believers, hell-bound heretics—you can join us and become like us, but if not...well then....;

Fundamentalists envision themselves as part of a cosmic struggle—everything is seen in terms of good and evil. You will hear language about the evil one and his work confusing humans—an easy dichotomy to say these things are wrong and these things are right. Period. Without critical thought of why those certain things are right or wrong;

Fundamentalists seize on historical moments and reinterpret them in light of this cosmic struggle;

Fundamentalist demonize their opposition and are reactionary—their language is hyperbolic and extreme;

Fundamentalists are selective in what parts of their tradition and heritage they stress, tossing out anything that contradicts current goals;

They envy modernist cultural hegemony and try to overturn the distribution of power—because fundamentalists believe they, and they alone, have the true understanding of what God wants for humans, they believe they should then have secular power in which to coerce others into believing as they do.

And our brothers and sisters who adhere to a fundamentalist theology employ a different type of logic. Their logic is so different from normal logic, they cannot be argued with. For instance, in an argument over the existence of God, which is supposed to initially assume nothing, fundamentalists assume there is a god and that opposing statements are irrelevant. One can't even find common ground with a fundamentalist because they usually refuse to even move towards any common ground.

Christian fundamentalist groups place the highest priority on conforming to doctrine and the literal translation of the Bible which supersedes love, compassion, and service to humanity. Their insistence that what they believe is correct and all others' beliefs are wrong demands not only their conformity, but the conformity of society to their point of view. In essence, one must follow the Fundamentalist Booklet to the letter! And in addition to those rules, fundamentalists employ two additional tactics to win over converts:

An appeal to vanity— We are God's chosen people, a royal priesthood. God needs me in order to accomplish his mission—I use the pronoun his here because there is no room in fundamentalist theology to consider, even for a moment, that God is genderless. God is always seen as a white man.

Fear— You were born in sin, you are bound for hell. The only way to escape hell is through salvation; the only way to be saved is through us. This ensures loyalty.

But here's the problem— extreme Fundamentalism is harmful to human hearts and minds. Many of you sitting here today have come from this sort of community or church. Many of our friends and family members are survivors of this spiritual abuse. And the consequences are often devastating: Some reject Jesus and the church outright, some try to find another church in which to be in communion, and still others keep going back into fundamentalism. It's difficult to leave the religion of your childhood and youth because so much of this dogma and fundamental belief is embedded deep within. It's hard to pry it loose—even if you're incredibly motivated. It's usually easier to try and ignore the whole thing!

Many folks today consider themselves more as “followers of Jesus” than followers of or believers in a Cosmic Christ. They believe the stories and teachings about Jesus hold significant truths that can be applied to their lives: love of neighbor, care of the poor, challenging the existing social order that bars some people from fully participating in life. Our very basic human need for security, for a clear understanding of how to behave in the world, makes fundamentalism attractive to some people: especially to people who are uncomfortable with ambiguity. There's a thread of Christianity (in fact in every faith system) that holds that its core teachings and scriptures are infallible—that they are incapable of holding any falsity. They are true at their core and throughout all time. This is the belief that Tevye struggles with

in his story. He believes that the teachings of his faith are more important than the love of his daughter. And yet, he breaks the rules and loves her anyway.

How many stories do you hear every day about how rigid, unmoving belief has caused pain and heartache in families? I hear about this pain every day, in one form or another. Usually it's because a family member has fallen in love with someone other members of the family don't wish for them to fall in love with. Just a few decades ago families were split in two when a white son fell in love with a girl of color. Recently families are destroyed when human hearts fall in love with people of the same gender and then instead of living their lives in the shadows, they are saying that their love is just a God-given as anyone else's love—and not only should it be tolerated, it should be celebrated—just as your love is celebrated—just as anyone's love is celebrated. As Lin-Manuel Miranda so beautifully stated at the Tony Awards a few years ago: "Love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love-- cannot be killed or swept aside." What misery people create for themselves when they chose rigid belief in bad interpretations of poorly translated documents from antiquity, over the love of their family, their friends...their children-- precious, unrepeatable human souls who are alive and standing right in front of them, begging to be loved.

When asked what he thought was fundamental to faith, Jesus replied very simply: You shall love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. On these two things hang all of the law and all of the prophets: they are fundamental to right relationship

with God. I believe if our faith is based instead on these two fundamentals: Love of God and love of neighbor, then the entire structure built upon that will withstand any number of storms.

Something happens to us when we harden our hearts and minds and latch on to old fundamental beliefs. We become rigid in our thinking—unable to see alternative points of view. We lose our empathy—because we’ve already reached what we believe to be the definitive answer to the question. Here at University Church we cherish the questions—we live into the questions. We struggle with them, we discuss them and debate them—and often we find a new insight into them. It is how we think about answering the questions that we find our true selves. Granted (here’s my appeal to vanity), most people don’t want to do this—it’s hard work to live your life in this ambiguity—this delicious ambiguity, as brilliant comic Gilda Radner called it. I put her quote in the bulletin today because I think it conveys much about how we feel when we stand in the middle—in the gap—in the liminal space between knowing and not knowing: Certainty and uncertainty.

As Gilda was facing the end of her life, she wrote these words: “I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.”

Human beings dislike change—we really do—and while parts of our brain crave novelty and innovation, the rest of our brain is very happy with how things are right

now. So what would it look like if we built our faith on some new fundamentals? 5
life-giving interpretations that stand against rigid dogma. Gary Cox, this
community's second Senior Minister outlined these possible new fundamentals in his
book: "Think Again: A Response to Fundamentalism's Claim on Christianity". Here
are his New Fundamentals:

Love God

Love our neighbors

Faith in God

Joy

Don't judge!

We'll explore these five alternative fundamentals in the coming weeks as we try to
pry loose some of the negative residue from the influence of fundamentalism in our
lives and apply some more life-giving interpretations. .

Gary Cox writes this as the ending of his book: "We may differ over how Jesus came
into our world and how he left it. But we love God and neighbor, we take joy in life
and have faith that this amazing creation is all worthwhile, and we refuse to judge
other people as they embrace the mystery of life.

There's a word for people who respond to life in such a manner. They are called
Christian." AMEN

Please stand as you are able and sing our closing benediction song.

RESOURCES:

Cox, Dr. Gary. *Think Again: A Response to Fundamentalism's Claim on Christianity*.
Wichita, Kansas: University Congregational Church Press, 2006

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/excommunications/2014/12/religious-fundamentalism-a-survivors-story/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_infallibility