

Sermon given by John H. Kemp  
Pilgrim Congregational Church  
Duluth, Minnesota  
April 28, 1996

### WHO SPEAKS FOR GOD?

Jeremiah 7:1-7

Romans 12:3-17

\*\*\*

The Biblical Word speaks to us individually in our personal needs for strength and renewal. Just as much, it speaks to those who claim to be God's *people*. Jeremiah the prophet held that people accountable to the purposes of the Almighty, defined by clearly stated principles of justice: "If you truly act justly toward one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place...." Paul the Apostle wrote the young church in Rome the core meaning of Jesus' gospel of love, a strange way of compassion and mercy in a tough world. These two great biblical figures were bold to claim to speak for God: but their speech was measured by a lofty ethic seldom heard or followed in their worlds. Surely in some way, God's purposes were made known through them!

Last Sunday, our after-worship conversation focused on the Christian Coalition and how that organization has all-but-captured the word *Christian* for its particular ideology and use. George Bernard Shaw once said, "God created us in his own image, and we decided to return the favor." We've certainly seen *that* in recent times. Pat Buchanan only played to the conviction of his followers when he proclaimed, "We've got God on our side!" Well, I think we'd agree that, as we say today, "Pat is no Jeremiah, no Paul the Apostle!" Far from it!

Whatever our political affiliation, that kind of theological and moral absolute doesn't sit too well with our tradition. We'd kind of like to use that term *Christian* to identify ourselves as well! And we'd like to think the Almighty might look upon us with favor at least occasionally! When any one group claims to have a monopoly on moral truth and religious understanding, and then seeks to impose it upon everyone politically: well, that doesn't really sit too well with most folks found in U.C.C. congregations - and a lot of others, too.

But - and that's a big *but* - lest we start feeling a bit too righteous over *our* side of the fence, we might remind ourselves of a couple of things!

First, we who prize the openness and lack of dogma in our tradition might remember and be humbled by the shadow side of our own story: that our own congregational heritage was deeply rooted in very similar moral certainties that proved rather disastrous to any who dared dissent.



Our New England ancestors came to these shores to create the divine commonwealth, and those Puritan Congregationalists knew *exactly* what that meant! Roger Williams who dared advocate religious liberty found out the hard way. So did those women of Salem, burned as witches - and New England Indians, all but obliterated as sub-humans!

Two hundred years later, in the early nineteenth century, most Congregationalists still were locked so rigidly into theological orthodoxy that those who found themselves on the fringes felt no home and departed to found the Unitarian Churches. About the same time, as the first Irish migrated to New England, our enlightened forebears, convinced those intruders were nothing less than the pope's shock troops, welcomed them not only by publishing hate tracts that would make today's Religious Right look tame, but also by rioting in the streets of Boston and burning down convents! Today's militia have nothing on our enterprising forebears! In fact, it wasn't until the latter part of the 1800s that Congregationalists showed significant signs of what we might call a more "liberal" theological spirit.

At the same time, we need to be honest with ourselves in another way: even in those times of theological and moral certainty, much good flowed out of our churches. That same zeal to build God's kingdom was convinced that it would happen only as we educated our minds to the fullest potential God gave us to understand what that kingdom was about! And so not only were excellent universities and colleges started wherever Congregationalists settled - from Harvard and Yale to Mount Holyoke to Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, Grinnell, and dozens more, but the very concept of universal public education was begun - even if *that* had as one of its purposes indoctrinating proper Protestant values in all those foreigners coming to our shores!

That same zeal, convinced Congregationalists of the absolute evil of slavery. The abolitionist movement was deeply rooted in theological and moral certainty of God's will and purposes being spoken to them, even, ironically, as Southern Baptists preached with the same certainty that God willed slavery.

This bit of history reminds us that *all* of us - on *both* left and right are vulnerable to the arrogance of certainty - and also that good as well as evil can issue from that certainty. For all the ways today's Righteous Right may be repugnant to me, I need to acknowledge that it has reminded us that living in a morass of moral relativity just doesn't cut it: we really need to ground ourselves in some fundamental shared principles and values.

But that doesn't lead us into the arms of the religious right. My reading of those values comes out very differently from theirs: the biblical mandate of prophets and Jesus as I understand it is based on themes of compassion, openness, inclusivity, community, justice, peace. We advocate "human values" in all the rich diversity of our human family; we advocate "family values" in the many ways we gather as family. We humbly yet boldly claim the name Christian as followers of Jesus Christ in the ways we feel called to follow. These are what offer meaning and purpose to the journey.



It is so timely and such a gift that we will host Jim Wallis this Friday. More than almost any other Christian leader today, coming out of a deeply rooted Evangelical background, he transcends the traditional, baggage-filled polarities of liberal and conservative, right and left, to offer a richly spiritual understanding of our call to be involved in the public life of our country with commitment to those values *we* share - in whatever partisan way we choose individually to express those values.

A new grass roots coalition is popping up around the country as an alternative to the Christian Coalition. It's called the Interfaith Alliance. Wallis had a big part in its formation. I like its purpose: it describes itself as "an inclusive, non-partisan organization, committed to promoting the *positive* role of religion as a healing and constructive force in public life, providing people of all faiths with an alternative voice to that of radical political extremists." It concludes: "Because extremists have claimed to be the only valid religious voice in public debates, we, as people of faith and conscience, choose to respond. It is now more important than ever for us to embrace the religious freedom and civil liberties we all enjoy. We stand as a reminder to the general public that compassion, tolerance, and justice are at the center of our spiritual journeys." Do those words speak to us? Would such a group be a positive force in our city?

We at Pilgrim Church have a particular gift to offer our community in our celebration of diversity and inclusivity. *Our* wrestling is not about *whether* God calls us to be work for justice, but *how* we do it, the form it takes. How we live out our faith may seem peculiar to some, but it's who we are - or at least strive to be. I think of no better example than when Steve and Terese's baby was baptized - one parent a Pilgrim, the other a Jew; standing as witness, a Benedictine sister and as sponsors, a Muslim and a Jew, together with this Christian congregation. I think everyone at that service felt good to be part of a church that lived in that spirit. Yet even as we value that openness, we're challenged not to dilute our faith to a lowest common denominator, but allow it to discover and explore new depths of richness and understanding as it guides and prods, comforts and strengthens, us on our journeys.

*Who* speaks for God? Dare any of us be so arrogant to claim anything like a monopoly? Yet the possibility remains - perhaps we *might* live in such a way that God's love and compassion just might be glimpsed in us, in the church we claim to be!

Yes, God's grace does work in strange and mysterious ways - even through such clay vessels as you and me!

Praise be to God!