

## **Following THE Way**

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr. at Peace United Church of Christ  
May 22, 2011

Last night I was on I-40 with Paula driving back from the Southern Conference meeting in Portsmouth Virginia. It was 5:57 p.m.; 5:58, 5:59, 6:00. It was time. *It's the end of the world as we know it; it's the end of the world as we know it; it's the end of the world as we know it; and I feel fine.*

Yes, unless you are a contestant who has spent the last month alone on CBS' Survivor Island, you know that 89 year old Family Radio patriarch Harold Camping predicted yesterday, May 21, 2001 to be the beginning of the end. Of course, this is the same Harold Camping that predicted the end would come in 1994. So that would mean Camping is 0-2. Dude, even the Chicago Cubs have a better batting average than you do.

Maybe it's the psychotherapist who lives in me, but I would love to know what was going on in Camping's mind last night. I mean, how many hours of his life has he spent talking about the end of the world? And what about all of that money he spent? According to a story in yesterday's Los Angeles Times, Family Radio spent 100 million dollars for this campaign. So let's do some comparisons. It costs Habitat for Humanity between \$60,000 and \$75,000 to build a single home. That means that Habitat could have built over 1,300 homes for the same amount of money that Family Radio spent. The Water Project digs wells in Africa at a cost of \$4,400 - \$35,000. That means that with \$100 million, the Water Project could have provided at least 3,000 wells. Rotary Club International is attempting to raise \$200 million to eradicate polio in our world. Camping could have provided half of the money.

"But Jim, Family Radio is just talking about what the Bible talks about." No, not really. Would you like to guess how many times the Bible mentions rapture? ...Once. That's it. I Thessalonians 4:17 reads "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever." Rapture comes from a word in Latin for "caught up." So we've got one usage in the New Testament. How about references to the return of Jesus; how many of those are there? Well, the New Testament uses the word "epiphany" 5 times to refer to the return of Christ. On 17 occasions the New Testament refers to the parousia or the "arrival" or "coming of Christ." The word "apocalypse" is used, in varying contexts 18 times. So without arguing as to their exact meanings, we have a total of 40 uses of the words *epiphany*, *parousia* and *apocalypse*. On the other hand, there are more than 300 verses in the Bible about the poor. Jesus talked more about money than he does Heaven and Hell. One source I looked up said that one of every 7 verses in Luke talks about money. So if the Bible is the Word of God, and the Bible mentions the rapture once, and the return of Christ perhaps 40 times, but the poor 300 times, then why is \$100 million spent on a rapture campaign?

And that's what I don't get about some of these folks out there; it would appear that on a regular basis the people screaming the loudest that they're following Jesus are the worst at following him. David Koresh in Waco, Eric Rudolph who evaded the FBI for years here in North Carolina, Fred Phelps of Kansas all justified or justify their behavior with their Christian beliefs. The entire purpose of the Klu Klux Klan was to reestablish Protestant Christian Values in American by any means possible. For them Jesus was the first Klansman and crosses were not burnt, but rather "lit" as a symbol of their active and vibrant faith. And sadly I could spend all morning doing this. The Army of God has been attacking abortion clinics and doctors since 1982. The Lambs of Christ, Christian Identity groups and Christian Patriot movements have all been associated with, accused of, and/or found guilty of terrorist attacks. At the end of 1999 a group ironically called Concerned Christians were deported from Israel for planning attacks in the Holy Land so as to help

speed along the coming of Christ. The Southern Poverty Law Center started counting hate groups in the 1980's. Today they have identified over 1,000 separate groups, including I might add, a Christian phalange group in Newton, NC with an axe to grind against Muslims.

But the righteousness of the religious is nothing new. This morning we heard how Stephen was stoned to death by those who believed their actions to be justified, necessitated and even blessed by the Almighty. They thought they were doing God's will even as Scott Roeder believed he was doing God's will when he walked into a Lutheran Church and shot at point blank range George Miller, a Wichita ob/gyn. So, since most of us are not familiar with the DSM-IV, the Bible by which mental disorders are diagnosed, is there a criteria by which we can figure who's a nutjob and who's a misguided zealot? When people start talking about God and the Bible and what it says, how do we know what and who to listen to and what is really nothing more than sound and fury signifying nothing?

I think John gives us some guidance when He says today that Jesus is THE way, THE truth and THE life. Now the religious orthodox love to hold this passage over others, especially those such as myself who don't believe Muslims and Jews are going to Hell. Evangelical author and megachurch pastor Rob Bell has been pulverized in the media by Christian leaders for daring to believe that Ghandi isn't in Hell. At my own ordination conference this issue was used to determine whether I was orthodox. But they had to keep asking me about it because I never quite gave them the answer they wanted to hear. So let me say that I believe Jesus is THE way, but... But what many don't seem to understand is that the very one we profess to be THE way is one who talked with heretics and partied with those who were supposedly going to Hell. The one we profess as THE way, never really inquired about what we believe. But, he was absolutely obsessed with how we behaved towards others. The one we profess as THE way is the one who was crucified because of who he ate with and hung out with.

And how did THE way and THE truth respond to heretics; to people who get it wrong about God? Well, Jesus' longest recorded conversation is with a heretic, a member of another religion who was also a woman and who had a number of men in and out of her life. And yet he told her before any of the disciples that he was the messiah. It was a very intimate discussion. Sorry Rev. Terry Jones of Florida; Jesus never threatened to burn her sacred scriptures. His furor and disgust appears to have been saved, not for the heretics and those of other religions, but for the religious orthodox.

If Jesus is THE way, then how do hate groups and patriot groups measure up to Him? Well, Jesus was a citizen of an overtaxed and oppressed people, so you might think that Jesus would have a lot in common with those folks. But sorry World Church of the Creator, sorry Christian reconstructionists, sorry to all the individuals who embrace the Christian identity movement and sorry Scott Roeder... Jesus never once advocated violence. He did, however, publicly state that we are to give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and he invited an IRS agent to join His group.

How about Fred Phelps? How about those who are so violently opposed to homosexuality? How do they measure up to Jesus if Jesus is THE truth? Well remember that in Jesus' day, people didn't believe anything was random. For example, they believed leprosy was a punishment from God given to the impure and sinful. In other words, this was a world that would have had no problem believing that AIDS was a punishment from God sent because of the so-called abomination of homosexuality. So how did Jesus respond to those believed to be repulsive in the sight of God? He talked to them. He ate with them. He loved them. He healed them. And get this - Jesus did other miracles without touching people, but he touched lepers. He touched them when he didn't have to touch them. Why would he do this unless he was trying to teach us something about THE way and THE truth?

Unitarian Universalists and many others believe even those who don't believe in Jesus as the Christ are going to heaven. Many Christians become absolutely histrionic when this line of thinking is suggested. After all, Jesus is THE way, THE truth, THE life... none may come to the Father except by me. And what is THE way by which the people of this world will come to the Father? THE way is a way of love, a way of grace, a way of tolerance, a way of compassion. From the conservative Tom Delay to the liberal Earth Liberation Front, attacks on the enemy are justified. Losing is not an option. Victory must be won at all costs; the ends justifies the means. And then there is Jesus. And then there is THE way, and THE way won it all by losing it all. And that is our standard. He is our standard. His values are to be our values; his life is to be our life because He is THE way. Maybe it really is as simple as WWJD: what would Jesus do? And Harold, he didn't obsess over the end of times. He never talked about the rapture. And Fred he never once preached a sermon of hate. THE way cared for the least of these, and blessed children, and lifted up the powerless, and befriended heretics and offering healing for all who suffered. Folks God doesn't need us raptured to heaven. God needs us right here, caring for the least of these, blessing children, lifting up the powerless and befriending the heretics and offering healing for all who suffer. That my friends is THE way. At one point we were not called Christians, but rather Followers of the Way. The Harold Camping's and the Tim LaHaye's and the Hal Lindsey's can obsess with the end of time. But as for us, may we be found worthy to once again be called Followers of THE Way. Amen.