

IS AMERICA GOING FASCIST?

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham

Sunday, January 30, 2005

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Readings:

“The Beatitudes,” Luke 6:20-28

“Faith Based Politics,” by Larry Robinson

People ask the clergy the darnedest questions! This week, for example, someone asked, “You’re a minister; can’t you do something about this dreadful weather?” So I gave the classic reply: “I’m sorry; like all clergy, I’m in sales, not in management!”

But when one of the most thoughtful people I know asked me the provocative question, “Is America Going Fascist?” I knew that the question was a serious one, deserving a a sermon in answer. Because what I said was, “Our government doesn’t deserve that label, at least not yet. But I agree with your implication: that there are deeply anti-democratic forces at work in our society, culture, and politics. I worry about them, too. And try to do more than worry -- out of a deep faith in democracy; and out of a conviction that the cultural, religious, and political is one that we can and should try to influence, all of us.”

Today, sixty years after the end of World War II, we forget the very nature of fascism. It’s not just foolish young Prince Harry thoughtlessly wearing a Nazi uniform to a party. Or Italian soccer stars who give fascist salutes; or resurgent right-wing nationalist politics in parts of Europe and Russia. Too many Americans seem to think *It Can’t Happen Here*, to use the title of a 1935 novel by Sinclair Lewis. We forget that Mussolini, who coined the term ‘fascism,’ came to power by election, as have other dictators. Today the Iraqi people are voting for a government. It would be ironic if America, having made that possible, lost its own democratic values. But Benjamin Franklin predicted back in 1787 that the U.S. Constitution was “likely to be well administered for a course of years” and then “end in despotism as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other.”

Wednesday night, as you watch the State of the Union address on TV, look closely at the decorations in the chamber of our House of Representatives. You may notice the Roman symbol of strength, the *fascis* – a bundle of sticks bound tightly together. Mussolini wasn't the only one to dream of a new Roman Empire. So did some of our forebears here.

Two weeks ago I reminded us of how Dr. King, surveying our history in the midst of the Vietnam war, and just a year before he was killed, saw three spiritual dangers always threatening the very soul of our democracy, trying to turn into a form of neo-imperialism: materialism, racism, and militarism.

We like to forget that the early colonies were corporations, set up by London merchants, for profit and exploitation, before they were democracies. That we were a slave society, before we were a free one, and that racism and genocide remain America's original sin; that we used military violence against native peoples to bring them our kind of freedom. So when the President, on idealistic grounds, invoking God, says that our nation is 'to spread liberty throughout the world,' we shouldn't be shocked if some question whether our history or present motives are pure enough to justify such a messianic mission.

Our material success is the envy of the world. But many people also resent the way in which we disguise the economic motives behind our foreign policy with noble rhetoric. "Fascism," said Mussolini, "should more properly be called corporatism, because it is the merger of state and corporate power."

The incestuous, often corrupt relationship between them has only grown since President Eisenhower warned us against the "military-industrial complex." One commentator says that we now have a "military-entertainment complex." Certainly democracy depends on a free and frank press, and an effective opposition, able to raise uncomfortable questions, investigate malfeasance and misfeasance, and inspire people to call for alternatives. Today, however, what passes for 'fair and balanced' news can seem like little more than government propaganda. The opposition in Congress is prevented from offering amendments to any but the most routine bills. Bureaucrats who want to tell the Congress the

real costs of war or of bills benefiting the drug or oil industries are threatened with firing. Conservative commentators on education or family life get secret government contracts, and your tax money and mine, deposited in the Social Security Trust Fund, is used to promote dismantling guaranteed benefits and partially privatizing the system, benefiting the financial services industry!

Mind you, I have no problem with honest business. Nor with fair markets – though I know enough history and economics to understand that fair markets *do* require ethics. Enforceable variations on “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Otherwise, as Jesus himself once pointed out, “to those who have much, more shall be given; and from those that have little, even the little they have shall be taken away.” [Luke 19:25] Which means that the strong win out, while the vulnerable lose.

Fascists see nothing wrong with this. They despise the weak. They celebrate the strong, the powerful and wealthy. Yet today even long-time Republicans like Kevin Phillips, warn that the growing gap between wealth and poverty threatens our very democracy. Corporations now pay very little in taxes, while receiving tens of billions in corporate welfare from government. Individuals, though they shoulder almost the entire tax burden, count for little – except as disposable workers or agents of consumption. Still, many simply accept, fatalistically, that this is how it has to be. This is freedom. In fact, when an unexamined dogma of free market fundamentalism masks abuses of power, it can be quite destructive – of individuals, community, the environment, and, as I have been saying, ultimately, of democracy itself. And fatalism is a spiritual foundation of fascism.

I understand why this new dogmatism is appealing. It caters to our American myth of rugged individualism, plus a kind of social Darwinism. For decades both were kept in check by civic and religious forces in our culture that preached a sense of community, and the gospel notion that “from those to whom much has been given, more is expected.”

Today, however, much of American evangelical religion, even while it argues against teaching evolution in school, seems to favor Darwinian economics. Perhaps because it

has become quite comfortable, and successful, worshiping both God and Mammon, celebrating Caesar's divine right to empire, waving Old Glory, and, among other idolatries, celebrating 'the family' in a way that plays on widespread anxieties about uppity women and sexual minorities. So many evangelicals now preach not only that God loves you, but God wants *you* to be rich – a prosperity gospel, rather than a call for justice and a critique of empire, which is what Jesus and Hebrew prophets always proclaimed.

“Well, it's a free country!” you say. Yes, but some years ago I went with a group of progressive religious leaders to visit the headquarters of Pat Robertson, founder of the so-called Christian Coalition, in Virginia Beach, VA. I had been to Jerry Falwell's Liberty University; I had been to Tulsa, to Oral Roberts University – with its unique architecture, which I described as defining a new style: “Pentecostal Martian.” I knew that Robertson had made a personal fortune in so-called Christian broadcasting. But I was surprised that Pat Robertson's place didn't look one bit churchy. Rather its style was “civic colonial” – a grand and updated version of nearby Williamsburg. Entering the grand hall, I noticed four portraits on either side of a brick archway: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison. Next to me was my friend Sandy Cloud – African American, head of the NCCJ, the National Conference for Community & Justice. I looked again at Adams, and Jefferson, both of whom were early Unitarians, and said, “Sandy! He's captured my people! Come with me to Robertson and help me tell him: ‘Let my people go!’”

But it's no joke: people like Robertson on the Christian Right want to take over the interpretation what our country stands for based on the way that *they* interpret the Bible. They ignore the preferential option for the poor that Jesus and the prophets articulated. For them, the teachings of Jesus they apply only to the inner life, not social existence. The prophets are used chiefly for scary, self-serving interpretations of current events. Above all, they promote an up-by-your boot straps or you-deserve-to-be-cursed theology based on texts like Deuteronomy 28 – look it up sometime – which is the very text Jesus was reinterpreting in the Beatitudes. Their theology is called “Christian Dominionism.” Democracy, in their view, can only be godly when dominated by like-minded Christians.

It's not only a form of religious fascism, but growing steadily in its political influence. Key phrases in the recent inaugural address were code language, aimed at its adherents.

Among other things, they believe the fulfillment of history will come with war and fire. They profess to love the State of Israel, and Jews, but only so that the Jerusalem Temple can be rebuilt, as a prelude to Armageddon and the second coming of Christ. They disguise their ultimate anti-Judaism under a wider anti-Semitism that plays on widespread contemporary fear and hatred of those other Semites, Arab Muslims.

A few weeks ago, Richard Clarke, who headed anti-terrorism efforts in the White House, and who resigned over the Iraq War, published an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*. It was framed as a speech given on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, looking back on how America reacted to a second wave of *al Qaeda* attacks, in 2006-07, regarded as almost inevitable. We've already got one extra-legal detention camp, in Cuba; two Patriot Acts, thus far; and a punitive culture, fueled by much of what I've been describing, with two million Americans behind bars – disproportionately poor and people of color. Imagine more.

As Martin Niemoller said in Germany: They came for the communists, but I said nothing, because I wasn't a communist; then they came for the Jews, but I said nothing, because I wasn't a Jew; then they came for the trade unionists, but I wasn't one of those either; then they came for preachers like me, but by that time there was no one to stop them.

I will pray, and work, and speak out every day of my life, to keep this beloved country of ours from going fascist; to keep faith in democracy, in networks and communities of solidarity and resistance everywhere. Remembering that Jesus, who yearned for a brotherhood and sisterhood of all God's children, was an anti-imperialist. Who told all who shared his yearning for an authentic Commonwealth, not of Caesar but of God, not to give up hope. For it may not be visible in worldly strength, but it is already here and present in spiritual potential, its outward weakness only disguising a deeper, hidden power. One that can yet grow great, like a tree from a tiny mustard seed, among those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand. So may it be. Amen.

(The author of this sermon wishes to direct readers to the following sources of more particular analysis, definition and concerns: Three recent books, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*, by Cornel West (Penguin, 2004); *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today*, by Harvey Cox (Houghton Mifflin, 2003); and *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace*, by Sharon Welch (Fortress, 2004); a recent sermon, "Living Under Fascism," by the Rev. Dr. Davidson Loehr, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Austin, TX; an article, "Everybody's Talkin' About Christian Fascism," by Gary Leupp, Professor of History at Tufts; and two classic books: *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*, by Bertram Gross (Evans, 1980); and Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, first published in 1935 and reissued more recently as a Signet Class.)

Faith Based Politics, by Larry Robinson

Isn't all political commitment based ultimately on faith? Would we invest our time, energy, care and money without the faith that our investment would yield a return? Some make this investment in anticipation of personal gain, placing their faith in money and power. Others of us invest in a vision of a world which may yet come to be: a world of justice, peace and beauty. We place our faith in life itself. We believe that life is infinitely creative, resourceful, reliable and ultimately good.

We believe that human beings are an expression of that life force and, as such, are creative, resourceful, reliable and fundamentally good.

We believe that all life is inextricably connected and that what happens to any of us happens to all of us.

We believe that evil exists as a potential in all human beings and that it derives from the illusion that we are separate from each other and from the fountain of life.

We believe that evil cannot be vanquished by force of arms or by fear. It can only be conquered by love.

We believe in the power of love and direct non-violent action to transform institutions, social systems and the human heart.

We believe that the arc of human history moves toward democracy, justice, and an appreciation for our wondrous multiplicity of expression.

We believe that the success of democracy depends upon an educated, engaged citizenry and that the opportunity for education should therefore be freely available to all children.

We believe that there is ample room in the human family for differences of belief.

We believe that it is the right of all people to enjoy life, liberty and the security of person; to be treated equally under the law; to enjoy freedom of thought, conscience and religion; to free expression and association; to have free access to clean water and air.

We believe that it is possible for all human beings to be free from economic want and poverty and to live with dignity.

We believe that peace among and within nations is only possible when these rights are assured to everyone.

We believe that the most fundamental responsibility of government is to ensure the health and well-being

of the land and of all its inhabitants.

We believe that individual rights must be balanced with responsibility for the well-being of the community.

We believe that the success and survival of our civilization and, possibly, that of the human race are in increasing jeopardy because of our commitment to an unsustainable pattern of resource consumption, particularly our dependence upon fossil fuels.

We believe that, while our planet's physical resources are finite, the resources of love and imagination are without end.

We believe that it is indeed possible to create a society which lives sustainably and harmoniously within the parameters of our planetary life support systems.

We believe that we have a responsibility to live in such a way that we do not diminish the opportunity for future generations to enjoy the same quality of life which we enjoy.

We believe that a human birth is a precious gift that is accompanied by a responsibility to act with generosity, sensitivity and compassion for all living beings.

We believe in doing our best to leave a better world for our children.

We believe all that people, individually and collectively, are capable of learning from their mistakes.

We believe that life inherently includes suffering, but that we have a responsibility as members of the human family to do what we can to ease that suffering and to structure our social institutions in such a way as to minimize unnecessary suffering due to poverty, disease, war, injustice and environmental degradation.

We believe that joy is also an inherent feature of life and that it is possible to participate joyfully in the suffering of the world.

We believe that each and every life has inherent value and is worthy of respect.

We believe in poetry, art, music, dancing and the spirit of play.

We believe in the power of truth.

We believe that at the heart of all things is an ineffable mystery worthy of awe and wonder. It is this faith which informs, guides and sustains our work in the world.

Larry Robinson is Mayor of Sebastopol, CA; he is reached at lroboet@sbcglobal.net