

A sermon delivered by the Rev. John Aeschbury at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 8, 2010.

“Seek, Rescue, Defend, Plead”

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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If you were one of the 130 people from First Congregational Church to attend the BREAD Nehemiah Action Meeting in May, you know that one of the things that the organization is fighting for youth at-risk.

We are going after two things. First, we want the Columbus City Schools to stop suspending students out of school for truancy. (There were 4,262 out of school suspensions for truancy in 2008-09 school year.) At the Nehemiah Action, Dr. Harris committed to take that action and has already outlined several steps to implement that commitment.

The other thing that we are going after is an expansion of the KEY truancy program. As a pilot program, KEY reduced chronic truancy by 55% at six schools in two years. KEY intervenes early with students who are missing school in order to identify roadblocks to their attendance and overcome those roadblocks. This is critical because kids chronic truancy tend to be at-risk for all kinds of destructive behavior: drug use, crime, academic failure, violence, dropping out, and so forth. If we address truancy early on, in elementary or middle school like Project KEY and if we address underlying causes for truancy like Project KEY, we are very likely to

save kids, increase the safety of our neighborhoods safer and make our city stronger.

On Tuesday night, the Columbus school board voted to allocate \$50,000 to expand Project KEY. On August 26, the Franklin County Children's Services Board will consider a proposal to allocate \$100,000 to expand KEY. With this funding, KEY will be able to expand outreach to another 200 students in the coming school year. And it will lay the groundwork in coming years for a system-wide and county-wide implementation of KEY.

Jackie Lowery of First Congregational Church is one of the people heading up BREAD's At-Risk Youth Committee. First Congregational was one of five congregations that had more than 100 people at this year's Nehemiah Action Meeting. Isn't it pretty cool to be able to claim this victory for our children and our community? Give yourselves a pat on the back. Because of you and the others in BREAD, CCS will stop suspending students out of school for truancy and more than 400 students will get timely intervention to turn around their school attendance. This is a shining example of what "church" should be doing: fighting for the children who are most at risk of failing.

Of course, the school board vote and the role of the BREAD churches to secure this commitment did not make the news this week. What did make the news this week was the announcement by novelist Ann Rice (*Interview With a Vampire* author) that she was giving up Christianity. She said, "For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous group. For 10 years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else."

She went onto say, "I quit being a Christian. I'm out. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-

science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.”

With this announcement, Anne Rice named the problem with "being church." Christian bigots have sanctified hatred. Too often, "the church" is associated with hating gays, hating women, hating Muslims, hating anyone who is different from themselves. Christians routinely confuse their cultural practices with Christian values. They confuse the things with which they are comfortable with the demands of Christ. And then, they will condemn anyone who is different.

This conflict for the heart and soul of the church (and other religious institutions), is not a new one. It is in the Hebrew scriptures, in the New Testament, in the early church, in the middle ages, in the Reformation, in the Colonial period, throughout American history, in the Civil War, in civil rights and right up to the present age. Religious leaders developed a theological rationale for chattel slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries while the abolitionists were motivated by religious sentiments. The Dutch Reformed Church provided the moral authority behind apartheid in South Africa while Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other faith-filled people orchestrated the pressure to overthrow it. Martin Luther King, whose faith sustained the civil rights campaign in Montgomery, Birmingham, the Deep South, and across this country, found that some of the most frustrating opposition came from moderate "church people" who agreed with this aims but not with his methods.

Isaiah lived during a time of relative prosperity for Israel. Assyria and Persia were engaged in struggle for power. This struggle created space for Israel to thrive and thrive it did. According to the Torah, this prosperity should have enabled the society of Israel to meet the needs of its weakest citizens, to care for the widow and orphan. Instead, the prosperity was put at the service of those in power. Palaces and homes were trimmed in cedar and gold leaf. Exotic foods, oils, perfumes were imported. The king accumulated wives, horses, chariots. Wars of acquisition were constantly being waged.

This made God mad.

*Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!*

According to Isaiah, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had to do with the growing disparity of wealth (read the first 10 chapters of Isaiah). It had nothing to do with sexual practices.

What made God even more angry was the attempts by Israel to fool God by going about their religious rituals as if everything were okay.

Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Instead God tells the people of Israel, the leaders of the society really, what God wants. God wants them to

1) **Seek Justice:** In Hebrew scriptures, seeking justice is not to be confused with acts of charity. Justice is about setting up systems for housing, education, health care and food so that everyone has a chance to eat and live. Pope Paul VI stated that "what is owed in justice should never be given in charity." When BREAD was in the middle of its payday lending campaign, a friend sent me a flyer from one of the payday stores that they were having a canned food drive. Payday lenders who were charging 400% interest for short-term loans were collecting

canned goods to give to the people trapped in their debt cycle. Justice demanded that we fight to lower the interest that they could charge and then some of those families wouldn't have to depend on donated canned goods.

2) **Rescue the Oppressed:** Whose side are you on? Do not trust "religion" that seeks to demonize the victims. From the time of the Hebrew slavery in Egypt and the confrontations with Pharaoh, God has shown that God chooses to be on the side of the poor and oppressed. If you want to be on God's side, you might want to hop the fence.

3) **Defend the Orphan:** Children are especially vulnerable and often among the most vulnerable. While we don't have a "hunger" problem in the U.S., we have a serious malnutrition problem for the poor as obesity skyrockets. The food that is most accessible to the poorest children is the worst possible food for them. Highly processed carbohydrates, high fat, low in nutrients. This is just one example of how children are vulnerable in our society.

4) **Plead for the Widow:** One of the things that made Hebrew religion special is that it demonstrated concern for the orphan and widow. In 8th century BCE, the widow did not have status, could not own land, didn't have a voice. Torah and Jesus demands special consideration for marginalized populations, even if they are undocumented.

Isaiah tells us that these things are "true worship". You can say all of the prayers that you like, you can sing songs, listen to lyrical preaching, observe mesmerizing images, but those acts of worship will not make up for the lack of justice.

I totally get why Anne Rice is giving up Christianity. There are times when it just seems like you are always losing the battle to help refocus the Church on what it is called to do. There are times when the only thing that you get from hitting your head against the wall is a headache. Probably half of my seminary colleagues have left the church.

As for me, I will stay and fight for the Church, for Christianity, not because it is perfect but because I don't want the name of Christ to be corrupted by the "faithful." So I will:

Seek justice by working with First Church and others to build powerful justice ministries that can turn out as many people for the annual Nehemiah Action as they turn out on Sunday morning.

Rescue the oppressed by working to build relationships between very diverse segments of our community so that we can learn one another's stories and struggles and figure out what we need to be fighting.

Defend the orphan by taking special care to watch out for the children and work to identify ways to make sure that more and more children have the tools to be successful.

Plead for the widow and all of those without "status." I will work to broaden the base of BREAD so that more and more people have a voice.

Isaiah tells us that our welfare, our prosperity, our destiny is tied not the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Our welfare, our prosperity is tied to the oppressed, the orphan, the widow.

In fact, not only is this good spiritual policy, I would argue that it is good economic policy. It is ridiculous to write off a generation or a segment of the community and refuse to give people the tools to be successful.

My salvation and liberation is tied up with the salvation and liberation of the oppressed in at least two ways. First, when I die and appear at the heavenly gates for the entrance exam, I don't think it will be enough to say that I believed in Jesus if I can't show how it changed my life.

Secondly, fighting for justice keeps me honest about myself and my world. It is way too easy to get seduced by good living and I

don't trust myself. When I am in relationship with people who don't have good food to eat, it is a good reality check. Ten years ago before the Food Network, I didn't know that I should have fresh basil growing in my garden. Now, I can't live without it. Fighting for justice keeps me grounded.

For all of those reasons, I will continue my walk with Christ by engaging the church in campaigns to seek, rescue, defend and plead. Thanks be to God for giving us this ministry. Amen.

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