

Affirmation, Affirmation, Affirmation  
November 5, 2006, Dr. June Goudey, United Church of Christ in Simi Valley

**Isaiah 12:2-6**

***Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the HOLY ONE is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.***

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day:  
Give thanks to the LORD,  
call on his name;  
make known his deeds among the nations;  
proclaim that his name is exalted.  
Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
let this be known in all the earth.  
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

1 John 4: 18-21

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Welcome to Jeopardy Sunday! It's your job to give me the question after I provide the answer: Ready? Here's the first answer: location, location, location.

Second answer: Practice, practice, practice

Third answer: affirmation, affirmation, affirmation

Fourth answer: guilt and fear

What lies behind these answers is the core value on the bulletin cover:

Our church (location)

Practices

An affirming faith

Rather than one based on guilt and/or fear.

Each of these answers could be the basis for their own sermon. But don't worry; I don't plan to speak for an hour and a half. My sermon title, affirmation, affirmation, affirmation suggests that the phrase "an affirming faith" is the key to this core value. For over a year now I have included a monthly affirmation in the bulletin with the reminder that we are made stronger by what we affirm than what we deny. In this case what is denied is a faith based on fear and or guilt.

A few weeks ago, I led the Bible and Beyond Group in an informal comparison of the 12 points made in the book *Phoenix Affirmations*, the 8 points of The Center for Progressive Christianity, and the 18 core values of UCC Simi.

It turns out that these three sources are remarkable similar in the points they make, even if the words they choose differ.

The one that stood alone by itself however, was this one:

"Our church practices an affirming faith rather than one based on guilt and/or fear."

Faith based on guilt or fear is being rejected here, but why does that matter? Care to guess? (Pause for responses)

In truth, Christianity in the form of orthodoxy has sought to grow the church through fear rather than love. Fear in this instance has been tied to the notion of hell and eternal damnation. Christian believers, who live under the spell of hell, fear the consequences of disobeying divine commandments set down by an all powerful God who's greatest power lies in his ability to punish the rebellious.

What propels this way of thinking is **misplaced fear**. Listen to how The Apocalypse of Peter, an early example of the *Tours of Hell* genre talks about those who disobey:

And these things shall come to pass in the day of judgment of those who have fallen away from faith in God and have committed sin: cataracts of fire shall be let loose; . . . and the waters shall be changed and transformed into coals of fire, and all that is in it (the earth?) shall burn and the sea shall become fire; under the heaven there shall be a fierce fire that shall not be put out and it flows for the judgment of wrath. —

Today's core value rejects this way of imagining our relationship with God. In doing so it makes a distinction between Tradition what has been handed down from earlier believers and traditionalists. Jaroslav Pelikan spells this distinction out brilliantly: Tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition offers life; traditionalists offer rigidity by way of fear and guilt. And what of guilt?

Traditionalists argue that by “overstepping God-given boundaries, humankind came to know fear, shame, and death as God's presence was overwhelmed by the appearance of God's absence. That is until God proved his love by sending Jesus to die for us: As the apostle Paul writes “For if while we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10; emphasis added). Paul confesses that the sign of God's love—the death of Christ—is the antidote to God's wrath! How strange is this?

With one critical shift of imagery the violence perpetrated on Jesus becomes romanticized into *suffering love*—a love that suffers on our behalf. Incredibly, the violence that leads to the death of Jesus becomes less important than his death and the benefits it brings, notably forgiveness of sins.” \*

In contrast to Paul, one traditionalist theologian declares that the price of forgiveness is punishment, not love, for “only punishment” can remove guilt and without atonement (Jesus dying for our sins) there is no forgiveness.”

This argument is made by people who read the bible literally even though I John teaches “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

What is being rejected by today's core value is misplaced fear and guilt, not fear or guilt in and of themselves. We know fear is an extreme emotion hard-wired into our core being for the sake of survival.

Fear, is not a free-floating entity that we can easily pluck out whenever we wish. Fear is molecular; it is in our bones and our blood, our muscles and our nerves. Fear hides in the chemistry of our bodies and rides these interactions as it widens its reach.

Fear takes hold of the images and symbols by which we grasp the truths of our lives and transforms them into the prison cells of our past.

Fear narrows the horizons of grace by which we engage the world and turns us away from the gracious face of God. Yet fear need not be the death of us. There are things we truly ought to fear. This administration has made the fear factor a prime time way of life; but terrorism is not the worst thing we should fear.

If we think of the word fear as resistance, something we are to protect ourselves from; then we need to resist—oppression and injustice, abuse and violence, for what they can do to us; we also need to fear the extremities of pain, loneliness, loss, grief, and death, for the ways in which they can shatter our personal sense of safety and selfhood.

Likewise feelings of guilt, deserved or undeserved, often play havoc with our souls. One way of being able to deal with the enormous reservoirs of guilt that are capable of claiming anyone of us is to live the best lives we can.

If we are to take responsibility for things that we clearly know we have done wrong, we need to confess to God and to the offended party (whenever possible).

We also need to live as truthfully as we can, making amends as we go and trusting in God's grace.

The traditionalist church has rightly argued that confession is integral to a transformational faith. On the other hand, the church has wrongly emphasized personal unworthiness over social responsibility.

Confession, as Carter Heyward reminds us, “is always our first just act.” In loving God, we do not merely confess with our lips, we reorient our bodyspirits toward justice—toward the undoing of evil and the enactment of good.\*

That brings us to the word practice: This church says we don't just sit around rejecting fear and guilt, we put into practice what we preach, an affirming faith that creates a force-field of active love, love in action that transforms our misplaced fears and rejects undeserved guilt.

This may seem more easily said than done, but that is what an affirming community can do for us. Dot Blankley and I attended the regional meeting of The Center for Progressive Christianity last weekend and were blown away by the presentations of Diana Butler Bass, a church historian, whose new book *Christianity for the Rest of us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming Faith* is a must read.

In January, I'll be leading a study group on *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, so if you are interested get a hold of a copy. It's in its second printing so it may only be available online.

In essence Butler Bass's research demonstrates that the old adage that liberal churches decline and conservative churches grow is no longer true. The Churches that are declining today are establishment churches those who offer traditionalist teachings that represent the dead faith of the living.

Churches that are intentional churches—conservative *and* liberal—are growing, because they have learned how to apply tradition—the living faith of the dead. These churches have two other identifying marks. One is the *practices* they demonstrate and the other is their commitment to seek *wisdom* rather than certainty.

And what are these practices: Taking Scripture seriously is one of them as is prayer, but the practices that stand out most of all are: hospitality, “living the questions”, befriending diversity, and forgiveness. Again and again, across denominational, racial and ethnic lines, Butler Bass found churches that practiced inclusive love rather than moral or theological purity.

Dogmatic faith and exclusivist tendencies are giving way in these churches to a more nuanced spirituality where men and women have the freedom to ask questions of their faith and live without certainty.

Practicing an affirming faith means paying attention to the practices that affirm human beings rather than forcing them to deny who they are by building a life based on lies. Ted Haggard's recent fall from evangelical grace is a case in point. We need to live our truths and ground our truths in the worthiness of all human beings

The Latin word *affirmare*, to assert, is the basis of the word **affirmation**, which in turn is the declaration that something is true. Emotionally, an affirmation is a statement or observation about an individual that seeks to emphasize positive qualities or characteristics. To affirm someone is to tell them what good traits they exhibit in order to express good faith or a spirit of cooperation or unity.

Affirmations are also (in the world of New Thought) auto-suggestive reminders that seek to release unconscious negative energy that we all carry with us. It may surprise some of you that the most often used and well-known affirmation is the word "Amen," which translates simply as "so be it," affirming the truth of whatever was written or said immediately prior. (See Wikipedia)

Isaiah provides us with a biblical affirmation that can serve as reminder of today's core value:

*Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the HOLY ONE is my strength and my might;  
God alone has become the source of my well-being.*

This morning—at this Communion table—our most important practices of hospitality, befriending diversity, seeking wisdom, and offering forgiveness are on display.

Here is where we demonstrate that we worship a God of grace and goodness, a God we need never fear but always trust. Here is where we experience the source of our well-being not in isolation but in community. Thanks be to God, So may the people say a hearty amen. **Amen.**

\* excerpted from my book: *The Feast of Our Lives*