

*God, Guns and Fascism*  
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson  
September 28, 2008

I attended the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa for graduate school, and was there from 1971-1978, with two years toward the end spent living in Germany. Iowa City is a lovely town, and Iowa a beautiful state, long known for its progressive politics. I was in the School of Religion, chaired by Dr. George Forell. He was a Luther scholar and professor of Christian Ethics and loved the limelight. Often blustery, he took a real interest in student's lives, and had been the primary creator of a two-semester course called Religion in Human Culture that could satisfy one of the core requirements for an undergraduate degree. Between 1000 and 1500 took the course each year, and graduate students led discussion sections while faculty did the lectures. It was a very good course. He was an excellent teacher.

We used Paul Tillich's definition of religion as ultimate concern. Tillich suggests that we all have some central existential concern, or motivating factor, something that drives our life and that, he says is our religion. Money, power, justice, beauty, the state, sports – all these things might fit that bill. Tillich, like my professor George Forell, fled the Nazis – their ultimate concern was the state, the Aryan state. You understand this I am sure, and so we looked at historical religious traditions as well as modern expressions of ultimate concern.

What is central in your life, what drives you, for what are you living? These are religious questions. Tillich went on to say there is real religion and there is false religion - idolatry – idolatry is when we hold something to be ultimate which is not. Certainly the state would come in here, but so could a religious tradition.

This all got the Iowa students thinking. Me, too.

While at Iowa, I was considered the department heathen; I think I was the only graduate student who claimed no religious affiliation, so I had to think about what my ultimate concern was and how I might express that. When my thesis defense came about, Forell was on my committee and he tried to make an issue of my having left the Lutheran church and so having just a Sunday school notion of faith. What this had to do with Melville's Use of the Bible in *Billy Budd* – my thesis, I am not sure, but I just kept asking him to clarify his question for me until he finally ceased. He later told me how much he enjoyed my thesis. Still ...

Forell was born in 1919, grew up in Germany, and studied at the University of Vienna. He told us that he was a member of the Hitler Youth when he was young, but became involved in anti-Nazi activities as a young man and immigrated to the US in 1939. He is still living I believe.

We spent a night in jail together. During protests over the US bombing of Cambodia, the Iowa national guard was called in to keep order at the campus, and one day a great number of people were rounded up, taken to the Iowa gym, and kept there in detention. Forell told me a bit about how he had learned about confronting power in his youth, and that fear was the beginning of the end of freedom. I remember his insistence on not being afraid.

A couple of days earlier, as the demonstrations had just begun, I was walking to my office early in the evening, when out of an alley several helmeted policemen rushed me and pushed me to the ground. I could not see their faces behind the shields of their helmets and I was afraid. I happened to be carrying a Bible and told them I was going to my office in the building right by where we were. One said, 'You better not be lying, boy.' Boy! Being called boy! [like the Southern politician who called Obama 'uppity' or the one who said 'that boy shouldn't have his finger on the trigger!'] I got up, with them, and went to the door and realized I had forgotten my keys! But, just inside the door was the janitor who recognized me and let me in. Still, the fear was real and I was sweating.

Fear, Forell claimed, was the beginning of fascism. The fear of losing what you have. He had seen it in Germany – Germans feared losing what they had in the economic downturns of the 1920s and the collapse of the economy there. The middle class, especially, he said - the bourgeoisie - feared losing what they had and looked for scapegoats to blame and to the state to protect them.

Fear. Fear. Ever felt fear? Feel it now in this troubled economic time? Feel it as we face this election? Fear?

The poet [and world champion weight lifter] Sri Chinmoy wrote:

*I fear to speak, I fear to speak:*

*My tongue is killed, my heart is weak.*

*I fear to think, I fear to think.*

*My mind is wild and apt to sink.*

*I fear to see, I fear to see.*

*I eat the fruits of ignorance-tree.*

*I fear to love, I fear to love.*

*A train of doubts around, above.*

*I fear to be, I fear to be.*

*Long dead my life of faith in me.*

Fear. It is no fun being afraid.  
Forrest Church wrote this:

*It was a cold, late winter's Saturday, the sky a canopy of gray clouds, matching the spirit of the times. When 100,000 Americans gathered on March 4, 1933, to hear the new president—a crowd extending from the steps of Washington's Capitol far into the distance around the reflecting pool and down the great mall—times were darker than they are today, much darker. Near the bottom of the deepest depression in its history, the boom had gone bust, almost one third of the population could find no work—six times today's unemployment rate—soup lines wound around entire city blocks, and shantytowns turned parks into slums. Thousands of schools were closed. There was a desperate run on the banks. People turned against their neighbors, looking for scapegoats, driven to violence by desperation. The whole fabric of society was unraveling before a helpless nation's very eyes.*

Though he had shown little over an honorable yet unspectacular public career to indicate he had the stuff to reverse the nation's fortunes, Franklin Delano Roosevelt put his finger on the problem, uttering the hitherto unspoken word that lurked in everyone's heart—fear. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,"

This past week President Bush went on TV to suggest that we should fear an economic collapse. I thought he looked afraid; it was not reassuring; he seemed to suggest that all we had was fear, and, once again, refused to ask anything of citizens other than patience and trust.

As Roosevelt took office, he claimed, in words that have resonated ever since, that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

I have always wondered if that is true – the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. In some ways, of course not – fear is an important response to real danger. It is right to fear that bear up on the mountain; it is right to fear the snarling dog charging you; it is right to fear the tornado bearing down. It's right to fear the power of addiction; it is right to fear fundamentalism of any sort. Fear in response to physical danger, or even emotional danger, is necessary.

But Roosevelt meant something else, I expect. He was talking about the loss of hope; he was talking about despair and the loss of courage, the fear that all is lost. The fear of losing what we have is very strong. George Forell had watched that kind of fear grow into fascism in Germany. When fear begins to rule, security becomes paramount and liberty is often the first thing to go.

We see this in our country – fear of others, fear of terrorists, of the evil-doers, fear of recession, fear that same sex marriages will threaten different sex marriage. Fear. It is no fun feeling fear. I saw it a lot in hospice – fear, not so much of death, but of the process of dying, and even more the fear of having to realize that a life had been wasted.

As you might have noticed, we are winding down an election cycle, and in less than five weeks, we will elect a new president. Many of you are deeply involved in this election, and for all of you who are doing something 'thank you.' You register people to vote here; I see a stalwart crew at the farmer's market every Saturday. Thanks to all of you. Much has been made about how important this election is, and while it may in historical terms be no more important than any other, it feels weighty.

The different nature of the tickets lend an air of historical importance; the sense of dis-ease in the country, the trying economy, the on-going war, suggests that much might be gained or much might be lost. Do we go back or do we go forward? What part does race and gender play in this election? I have fear for what might happen – I have picked my sermon title for November 9<sup>th</sup> already – 'Post Partum, Post Mortem' – depending on who wins and what happens on Prop 8.

A number of colleagues in ministry – all conservative Christians by the way – are planning to preach political sermons today and specifically endorse or support candidates, just what IRS regulations prohibit. Guess who they will endorse? They plan on challenging that law, hoping to have the right in the future to intrude in elections as much as they want. I doubt that they are doing this for high civil reasons.

I have mixed feelings about this, of course – it would be great to stand here and talk about the candidates and whether John McCain or Barack Obama express our values one better than the other. It would be great to weigh in based on our faith, to publicly proclaim whose vision is in line with our values. Suffice it to say that we are a liberal religious tradition, a progressive faith.

What has struck me, though, is how much campaigns point to fear [though one more than the other]– fear that the other will do this or that. Fear that citizens will lose more from the other guy. Fear – it is all over the place..

And I think that George Forell and Roosevelt were both right. When we are ruled by fear of losing what we have – whether it be things or customs - then it becomes easy to resort to a fundamentalism of a sort, resort to thinking liberty does not matter so much, resort to thinking only about security.

When fear rules us we turn inward, to a vengeful God or to guns to protect us – these guns can be real or metaphorical – real guns or words used like weapons. When we fear losing what we have, the seeds of fascism, in small or large ways, are sown.

We live in a society ruled by fear and by an assumption that, somehow, risk and tragedy can be avoided. Gated communities, battle-tank cars, over protected children – we have become convinced that sorrow and loss can be avoided. I remember when Elvis Presley came on the scene and people feared

that his music would unleash all kinds of destructive behavior; the same has been thought of hip hop and rap. Fear. Racism is deeply rooted in fear. Sexism is rooted in fear.

But, as Roosevelt claimed, all we have to fear is fear itself.

What does that mean for us? First I want to suggest that the opposite of fear is love, and that the operative value of love is courage. It takes courage to love – you know that well, because loving someone or something requires great risk. When you love you give away your heart, and that takes courage. Love is the opposite of fear – not desire, but love.

The second is to suggest that what we do is more important than what we have. It is deeds, not creeds again. Within these past 8 years, the administration has championed what it has called the ownership society, and in many ways has suggested that the mark of our greatness is the amount of stuff we have. Remember after September 11 when president Bush famously suggested that the way for citizens to combat terrorism was to go shopping?

I found it rather disturbing at both conventions, though especially at the republican convention, all the shouting of 'USA USA USA.' The idea of America first, that somehow we are the greatest nation ever in the history of humankind, that a certain God has blessed us uniquely to carry out our vision – this was disturbing. Remember Lincoln's caution in his second inaugural that while both sides claimed to have God on their side what mattered more was whether we were on God's side. With malice toward none – the meanness of the ilk of Giuliani, the self-righteousness of a Carville.

Anyway – don't let me get started.

It was all about fear when what we need is hope and courage.

Fascism enters when fear begins; when we are afraid of losing what is not central. It enters when what matters is what we own or have, and begins to disappear when we focus on what we do.

Fascism is anti-liberal, and we here are religious liberals. Liberal, liberal, liberal. A great word. Forrest Church titled one of his books 'God and Other Famous Liberals.' We are religious liberals. We may not all be political liberals, but we are religious liberals.

From our very beginnings, we have believed in religious liberty. Liberty – liberal. Hey! And what are some of the synonyms for liberal – well, they are magnanimous, generous, open, free, broad minded, open minded, moderate [yes, moderate – though I would rather be a radical], tolerant. And remember that the opposite of liberal is not conservative but illiberal.

Do we want to be less liberal? Less tolerant, less generous, less open-minded. Being liberal means strengthening those virtues - being more generous, more tolerant, more open-minded. Isn't this the answer to the question of what UUs believe – we believe in liberty, in gathering together to grow more in spirit and in mind, to become more free, more generous, more tolerant, more magnanimous. We are non-creedal not because we won't believe in anything but because we won't be limited in what we can believe.

And isn't the core of this hope and courage, the courage to do what is generous and just, the courage to do what is equitable and compassionate? And isn't courage the source of hope which counters fear and encourages love?

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Several same sex couples in our church told me that they had originally decided not to get married, even though they have been hoping for that right for some time. They had decided not to because if Prop 8 passed, the anger and disappointment would be so deep. But they changed their minds, and they told me because they did not want to live their life determined by fear or the fear of others. They wanted to hope, and they wanted to do something to demonstrate their hope.

This is what I mean – it is this courage born of hope and expressed in love that can keep the vengeful Gods of these times, the guns of hatred and intolerance, and the fascism of having from our doors.

Amen – let me hear you say AMEN. And maybe even a hallelujah!