

Dear readers, if there are any. Excuse typos; their R sum. Also, the use of boldface, italics, and quotation marks are most often a means of prompting the oral delivery of the sermon; they may be a bit melodramatic when read silently.

S Rose

Confusion Sermon

I get tired of thinking. Last week, I left our church council confused. We spent our time talking about making the Central Association of the Iowa Conference of the United Church of Christ more viable, or did we have any part in that? I felt confused. Then I got home. I picked up the copy of that week's *New York Times Week in Review* and read an account of Kashmir's takeover by the Indian government. Now, I think I'm up on world news—I always do pretty well on public radio's *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*—but I *didn't even know* that Kashmir had been under siege, that its young men had been tortured for reasons the folks didn't understand, or that their electronic communications had been cut off.

Then I read some stuff about the next election: I fared a little better. Joni Ernst is going to face a major challenge to her office; I know who Joni is. Mitch McConnell—the majority leader in the Senate—is in trouble with his constituents. I had a pretty good handle on that. But so is some senator named Cory Gardner—I had to look him up on *Wikipedia* to be reminded he's the Republican junior Senator from Colorado. That's how confused I was.

The good news is that I read further in *The Times* and was reminded that Gardner's Democrat challenger is John Hickenlooper. Hickenlooper is one of my favorite politicians. You might remember he briefly ran for President last summer. He rode a little bit of RAGBRAI, the Winterset to Indianola chunk. Long story short, he visited our house because we were having a party for Patti's RAGBRAI team, The Skunks; and the RAGBRAI legend John Karas was going to attend the party. So Hickenlooper was after a photo op. But, to make the short story longer, he gave The Skunks a keg of beer and me a bicycle jersey. I wore the jersey, but I didn't drink the beer. That's a different sermon.

Did I mention I get easily confused? So if this sermon sounds like I'm confused, so be it.

The lectionary today doesn't do a lot to help my confusion. We've got this analogy going on in the first reading from Isaiah—God is the husbandman of the field, the sower of the “righteous crop” that came up tainted by bad fruit. That *fruit* is the people of Jerusalem. So the way I read it, it's the *fruits' fault that they're cruddy*,

inferior and unwanted from birth. I'm confused. This omnipotent God puts in a crop, and the crop is bad. That's the **crop's fault**? I'm confused. That kind of analogy wouldn't fly in any other context. Let's try it. *Sally makes a dress and it becomes unraveled as she wears it.* Sally blames the thread, but who bought the thread? Who made the stitches? Sally.

Here's another. Ralph changes the oil in his truck, but the oil is defective, breaks down, and the engine fries. You can blame the oil, but who bought it? Ralph, the cheapskate. I'm confused.

Then there's the second reading from Isaiah. In it we encounter the bringer of the "Peaceful Kingdom," a descendant of Jessie; that descendent, I'm guessing, is the Messiah. Let's listen to part of that reading again:

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
 and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

OK. The Messiah is going to raise hell with the wicked. He's going to be nice to the poor and the meek. And he's going to do all that based on *righteousness* that has **no grounding in evidence**. To heck with what he sees and hears! He *just knows* what is equitable and what's not. Just knows. No see! No hear! Just **got it**. I'm confused. Even if I'm the righthand guy of God, and my job is to make the policy of God manifest, even if I got my marching orders straight from God Himself, wouldn't you rather I be just a little careful? Look around a little? Listen to what's going on? Especially to the meek, who don't get listened to much at all, regardless of circumstances? I'm confused.

It's not just this particular lectionary reading that confuses me. A lot of what I've been asked to believe, been **told** to believe, about Christianity has confused me over the years. Let me illustrate.

I may have told the story before. I was listening to a Southern preacher talking on my daddy's car radio in the 1960's as we were driving in central Alabama one summer evening. I'm going to tell it again. That "man of God" talked about how God *loved* the blue quail and God *loved* the Bobwhite quail, but that didn't mean that the two species **should mix**, should go to the same feeder so to speak. OK.

His point was that this same “separate but equal” policy of God’s applied to black and white people. They should avoid mixing, much less mating. But Negroes and Caucasians are all *people*. We ain’t separate species. Good golly, cattlemen and women have engineered greater genetic distinctions among different breeds of cattle than those that exist in the human species of different “races.”

The same is true of the different strains of common flowers that Ron and Jane plant and grow. (And this is totally off to the side, guess what is the most common flower folks raise across the globe? What else—*roses*.)

Speaking of “over the years,” it seems like a lot of Christian doctrine has been confused by the time and place that spawned it. Take the example I just gave you. Then there’s the “doctrine” of the “woman’s place.” There’s one of my “favorites”—“render unto Caesar’s what is Caesar’s, and render unto God what is God’s.” How much injustice on this planet has been rationalized by that one?

One verse in the New Testament especially confuses me, and it’s an important one. That’s John 14:6. We all know it, and it is a clear-cut proclamation that echoes *throughout* the New Testament. It goes like this, and this is Jesus Christ in first person: “I am *the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*” There is nothing confusing about that admonition. Straightforward. Unequivocal. My way or the highway. What’s to be confused by? Simply this: the sense I have, the sense I’ll bet a lot of us have is this: God isn’t petty! I remember as a kid thinking about the poor primitives who would never get to hear the “Word.” In college I learned about *socialization*, how the *perspective* you are ingrained with as a kid will stick with you. So how can I condemn a Muslim **raised** in her faith who doesn’t buy into John 14:6 because her Koran and culture proclaimed a *different* story? I read the words in the scriptures, and I’m sure I’ve recited them a dozen times before, but the conscience *built into me* by **being** a Christian, by being **raised** in the faith, by being a person **in awe** of this world, by knowing how **social group formation** works—I just can’t buy that my Muslim sister is doomed to hell! The *same* instincts and brain and culture that makes me **claim** Christianity also **tells** me different.

There’s a simple way of worming around this; that’s by proclaiming oneself to “come out of the Christian tradition.” Tradition/perdition/kerflooey—I am a Christian! That sense of identity is in the marrow of my psyche. I also know that if I were raised in a different culture where their sense of God came from a different history, a different text, a different set of circumstances, I’d likely be claiming with equal fervor that I am a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Shiite.

It just can't be "my way or the highway." In fact, I'm **not** convinced it could be any **one** way. This same God-given noggin I have, and soul for that matter, will **not** allow me to believe that God is that *petty*. I struggled with this same thought when I was twelve-years-old, and twenty, and thirty, and forty, and fifty, and—well—I'll stop there.

To confuse things even further, I believe, I know, that my "Christianity" is shaped by a lot more than the church or what we'd call Christian doctrine. I've been a sucker for books since I learned to read. And the books that fell into my youthful hands, those by Populist authors like John Steinbeck and Kurt Vonnegut to name a couple, have shaped by "Christian" perspective as much as any scripture.

Neither of those guys claimed to be devout, and Vonnegut in particular was very public in dismissing he was an "anything" in terms of an organized religion. Regardless, when I read him, I couldn't **not** wallow in his respect for the planet and his amazement about the human race. You see, that respect and amazement sings harmony with what I know as a Christian perspective. Those books I read, most of them over and over again, would not have rocked my world so much had their sentiments **not** pulled on my Christian heartstrings, had not seemed like catechism without the boredom.

Later in life, I discovered the novelist Ann Tyler, and the same thing happened, minus the machismo. If I had my way, her small novel *Saint Maybe* would be enshrined in the New Testament—not in the Gospels but certainly in the "Acts of the Apostles" section.

Well, enough book club.

There are a slew of other orthodoxies of the Christian faith that cause me confusion. You've probably got some of your own: doctrine about homosexual behavior, *do's* and *don'ts* that arose from infrequent references taken totally out of context come to mind, for example.

I'm going to cheat now. The topic of this sermon is *confusion*, **but** there are ideas throughout the Scriptures that **don't** confuse me. These are certain themes that I'm amazed by and enraptured by. They give me a sense of direction that is not exclusionary, that is not arbitrary, that has big warm arms seeking to embrace, not to choose the bad grape over the good grape.

What are they? I'm **not** confused by the doctrine of *altruism* that courses throughout the scriptures, Old Testament and New. Now, a lot of social scientists try to explain altruism as a human "instinct," going back to our time where we silly-shaped, bare-skinned, big-headed, relatively defenseless primates totally *depended* upon our immediate kin groups. Today, it makes sense for us to learn to cover each other's backs, take care of each other's kids, watch out for the pack. But Christianity—certainly the New Testament—pushes this altruism to *unprofitable* extremes. Care for the weak and the lame, whether they're "your folks" or not, Forgive each other, not once, not twice, but ad infinitum—there's no logic in that. And we are not to expect reciprocation! That's crazy maybe, but not confusing!

And that's basic Christianity. Evidently, it's so basic that a lot of churches have grown tired of it. I'm glad this congregation hasn't, or I wouldn't be here today.

Other doctrine that sings to me: there is the *awe* we're urged to find in God's creation, in God Himself. The payoff for that doctrine is more obvious. God knows how much richer our lives are every time we stop to smell the roses or to stand awestruck at the sight of the simplest sunrise, or to be amazed when one of our fellow critters creates a painting or song or poem that makes our world seem a bit different from how we've known it before, even as it makes it still familiar. Take a love song like "Something in the Way She Moves" by the Beatles, for example, or the painting "Starry Night." Wow!

Now there's nothing inherently Christian in those acts of engagement with nature or the arts, but God knows they lift our souls and make us something more *than* ourselves just as they make us more *of* our selves. And the desire for art spans religions and ages, even as religion is often a central subject matter for the arts. Now that's mystery, but not confusion.

So some of this confusion started with a question raised in our last church meeting. What are we to do about our relationship to the greater association of UCC congregations in our area? I'm still not sure, but the answer is a little clearer to me after thinking through this sermon. We need to start with the mission of Christians in the most general sense. That is to spread the *Word* and *serve the world* as Christ would serve the world. I struggle with that idea of spreading the "Word," because some of its *words* confuse me. However, when I think of the themes behind those words. First, to take relish in an amazing God who has given us an amazing universe—I think the world is hungry for that. We call that God Yahweh, but I'm not going to get into a fistfight with a Jew or Shiite or Muslim or pantheist over

labels. Second, the theme of *servicing ones fellow human*—I feel that in my core to be a **calling**. This congregation, and our denomination, has a good track record.

How much we can give to the larger church, in this case the association? I know we are doing a decent job of it, but we need to be mindful of *ourselves*, not selfishly, but so we can *continue* serving our fellow humans and, just as importantly, so we can continue to be a **small** congregation that is still a *big tent* for folks seeking communion with God, a God that allows them to be confused. So let's put our energy where it most belongs, and how it best fits us. Let us be known as a congregation that is welcoming to all who seek to worship, no matter how poor their understanding or how great their need. When we partner with the association, let's make sure it is to provide that big tent and to prepare clergy who are proper tentmasters.

In that tent, there is room for confusion, not just discourse, but plain old confusion. That's part of the human condition. But another part of the human condition is *anticipation*; we have a way of waiting to understand as we want to understand. T.S. Eliot said it well: *There is yet faith, but the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting*. I got that quote out of the same *New York Times* issue that started all this. Sometimes it's good to read things to the end.

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Benediction:

Lord, I am often confused. I am confused about injustice on this earth. I am confused sometimes by the scriptures. I am confused *oftentimes* by zealots who take your words to spread injustice and to lead your followers to live in anger and ignorance. I am confused, God, by many things humans say about you; but I am in *awe* of the human species, this planet that I live on, this universe that begs for wonder. Mostly Lord, I am humbled to be a part of it all.

Isaiah 5:1-7 & Isaiah 11:1-5
The Song of the Unfruitful
Vineyard &
The Peaceful Kingdom

5 Let me sing for my beloved
 1 my love-song concerning his
 vineyard:
 My beloved had a vineyard
 on a very fertile hill.
 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,
 and planted it with choice vines;
 he built a watchtower in the midst of
 it,
 and hewed out a wine vat in it;
 he expected it to yield grapes,
 but it yielded wild grapes.
 3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
 and people of Judah,
 judge between me
 and my vineyard.
 4 What more was there to do for my
 vineyard
 that I have not done in it?
 When I expected it to yield grapes,
 why did it yield wild grapes?
 5 And now I will tell you
 what I will do to my vineyard.
 I will remove its hedge,
 and it shall be devoured;
 I will break down its wall,
 and it shall be trampled down.
 6 I will make it a waste;
 it shall not be pruned or hoed,
 and it shall be overgrown with
 briars and thorns;
 I will also command the clouds
 that they rain no rain upon it.

7 For the vineyard of the LORD of
 hosts
 is the house of Israel,
 and the people of Judah
 are his pleasant planting;
 he expected justice,
 but saw bloodshed;
 righteousness,
 but heard a cry!

11 A shoot shall come out from the
 stump of Jesse,
 and a branch shall grow out of his
 roots.
 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on
 him,
 the spirit of wisdom and
 understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and might,
 the spirit of knowledge and the fear
 of the LORD.
 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the
 LORD.
 He shall not judge by what his eyes
 see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
 4 but with righteousness he shall judge
 the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek
 of the earth;
 he shall strike the earth with the rod
 of his mouth,
 and with the breath of his lips he
 shall kill the wicked.
 5 Righteousness shall be the belt
 around his waist,
 and faithfulness the belt around his
 loins.