

**A sermon written and delivered by Bob Bledsoe
at the Unitarian Society of Menomonie,
Menomonie, WI 54751
May 1, 2005**

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WITH GOD ON OUR SIDE

I first came to the Midwest in 1989 while I was traveling around the country looking for a place to do my graduate work. I met a fellow in a bar in Mankato, Minnesota, who turned out to be the director of the grad program at the school and who offered me a position with them. I went back east and collected my things, sold off my car, convinced an ex-girlfriend to drop me off on her way to California, and ended up back at Mankato just in time to start the required workshop I had to attend.

I found an apartment to share with other students, but this was August and the apartment wouldn't be available until mid-September, leaving me with no place to stay for three weeks. Or rather, no place with a roof. Since Cindy had left for the west, I'd been staying under a gazebo at a park seven miles outside town and riding my bike in to town every morning.

The Monday of the second week of workshop, one of the other grad students came up to me during the break. I'd noticed George Berg from a distance. He was older than I was but had lived something of a similar lifestyle, and in a couple things he'd said

during class I knew he'd been homeless himself and was now married with a large family. He also made no secret of his religious beliefs. George was a Pentecostal Christian, although that seemed rarely to come up in class except as someone might ask his opinion about some matter that might induce a moral response.

Anyway, George came up to me and said, "I hear you've been staying out at the park. My family lives a couple miles outside town on a farm we rent in a big old house. Would you like to come stay with us until your apartment opens up?"

Now I want to interject a moment here to lay out a bit of my background. I'd been involved with a number of religions in my time. I'd been raised a Seventh Day Adventist and lived with both Reformed and Orthodox Jews. I'd had a roommate who practiced Santeria, and I'd been in seminary and in retreat at a monastery. I'd been involved with a strange little social cult called Direct Centering and stayed for a while with a group of Hari Krishnas near an air force base. I was no stranger to intimidation or proselytizing and I knew what I was letting myself in for. I said yes and spent about two weeks with George and his family.

Now you may think you know how this story ends, but you don't really, and that's what I want to talk about today. I considered originally entitling this sermon "Fundamentalists I Have Known," because that's really what it comes down to for me. I have known a number of them, casually and intimately, and I have to tell you that they are just like the description Jews have for themselves: a fundamentalist is just like everyone else, only more so.

The end you're probably expecting to hear is that either George and I avoided talking religion the time I spent with them or we spoke of nothing but religion. You're

probably expecting me to say I was inundated with concern for the salvation of my soul and my need for conversion, or that we spent the entire time practically avoiding each other except when his wife drove us to school together. Neither of those situations is the truth. The truth is I had an exceptionally pleasant stay with George and his family. We talked about religion if I brought it up—they almost went to pains to make certain I was comfortable with them, not only physically but that I felt safe spiritually. I took part in their daily rituals, praying with them over each meal, because that was something important to them, but no one ever asked me to pray. One evening George asked if I'd like to attend a tent revival with them, and I did—I love tent revivals, the theatre of them, the focus, and especially the surge of energy one feels during one, as if one were borne on some invisible wave whether one believes or, as in my case, does not. They were open to my beliefs and asked my opinion about the Bible and spirituality and about my experiences. A couple years later, when his eldest son was recovering from a drug overdose in the local hospital, George asked if I would go talk with him, offer him a way out of his difficulties in my direction since he was so dead set against the direction George had taken. In short, they were not what we have come to expect from either the media presentation or from their public face in the form of Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell as typical born-again fundamentalist Christians.

Now when Unitarian Universalists talk about religious fundamentalists, we tend to be talking about the extreme violent examples we all know. Members of Al Qaeda, who flew into the Twin Towers. Erick Rudolph, recently convicted after hiding for seven years with the help of sympathizers of blowing up abortion clinics and a grandstand at the Atlanta Olympics. Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the transplanted Brooklyn dentist who shot up

a mosque in Hebron in 1994, killing 29 Muslims. Less well-known, we might think of the Hindu fundamentalists who rioted in February, 2003, killing over 3000 Muslims over the disputed town Ayodhya, which the Muslims claim by right of the Babri Mosque, built in 1528 and destroyed by Hindus in 1992, and which Hindus themselves claim as the birthplace of Rama. Or we might think of the nameless fundamentalist Buddhist monk whose assassination of President Solomon Bandaranaike in 1959 is credited with beginning the escalating war between the Buddhist government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers.

Just as the current American social equalization of jihad with violence, so we tend to equate fundamentalism with violence, either physical or emotional or violence to one's self. But that's no more true than that all Unitarians are Ralph Waldo Emerson or Bronson Alcott. These are, for a variety of reasons, simply the better-known versions.

First of all, what is a fundamentalist? It's really a very simple term: what it refers to is anyone for whom the fundament of his religion is The Word. I might expand that to take in The Authority, as well, since not every fundamentalist puts his entire religion on the unadorned word of god but all of them do put it on the interpretation of his local authority, whether imam, rabbi or priest. Often, the people calling themselves fundamentalists are attempting to rescue a religious identity, in all its sacredness, from absorption into modernity. I'd like to quote here for a moment from Wikipedia:

This formation of a separate identity is deemed necessary on account of a perception that the religious community"—that is, mainstream spirituality—"has surrendered its ability to define itself in religious terms. The 'fundamentals' of the religion have been jettisoned by neglect, lost through compromise and inattention, so that the general religious community's explanation of itself appears to the separatist to be in terms that are completely alien and...hostile to the religion itself. Fundamentalist movements are therefore founded upon the same principles as the larger group, but...more self-consciously attempt to build an

entire approach to the modern world based on strict fidelity to those principles, to preserve a distinctness both of doctrine and of life.

We all like to be unique and we all like to be right; with this formation, fundamentalists find a way to be both.

Fundamentalists see themselves as the bastion of true religion, as adherents of the original way the first practitioners of a religion practiced. They see themselves as practicing, say, the immediate Christianity of Jesus' death, or the Islam of the 7th century, or the Judaism of Abraham. They erect a wall of virtue between themselves and, not only alien religions, but between themselves and modernized, compromised versions of their own religion. Fundamentalist Christians consider being born again a minimum for fellowship, as Muslims see themselves as participating in *jama'at* (in Arabic, religious conclaves of close fellowship), and in Judaism as *Haredi* or "Torah-true" Jews.

"Fundamentalists direct their critiques toward and draw most of their converts from the larger community of their religion by [convincing] them that they are not experiencing the authentic version of their religion."

And they have converted. In the United States alone, the number of people identifying themselves as fundamentalists has grown from 27,000 in 1990 to 61,000 in 2001. These are likely only Protestant fundamentalists, as that is what the term has come to mean in the US. An interesting side note is found in the Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law: under the topic "fundamentalism," the editors make a point to specify that the term has taken on a negative connotation, meaning strict, literal interpretation, and so insist that, unless the group so identifies itself, the term "fundamentalist" shouldn't be used. However, open any newspaper to a story covering the war in Iraq and you'll note the number of stories filed with the Associated Press

referring to “fundamentalist Islamists” or “fundamentalist Muslims.” The point is that the number reported is probably lower than the actual number. Worldwide, fundamentalism is a phenomenon, and a few years ago Philip Jenkins published an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* pointing out that what he calls the “Next Christianity” is likely to be more recognizable to Pentecostals than to Congregationalists.

The conversion process is not to be taken lightly or minimized. Charles Strozier in his book *Apocalypse* refers to it as the “broken narrative.”

Before rebirth in Christ they described their lives as unfulfilled, unhappy, and usually evil. Their stories were discontinuous and full of trauma; faith healed them. That moment of finding a ‘personal relationship with the Lord,’ as they put it, was the great divide in their lives. It would be wrong to say that fundamentalists only thought about their pre-Christian selves as bad because the dogma of conversion demands a self-transformation...A biblical passage cannot impose a trauma on the self. But it is fair to say that fundamentalists experience trauma and then find a way to talk about it in the rhetoric of literal Christian belief. That rhetoric, in turn, builds on divisions. Satan opposes God; only a remnant of the faithful survive the end times ; violence pours out on the ungodly; ordinary church life moves toward totalism; and our bad, discarded, pre-Christian selves are washed away in the apocalyptic transformation of the rapture.

Fundamentalists have one life before their conversion experience, their vision on the road to Damascus, and another, deeper, richer life afterward. They call this being born again because, in their experience, it is exactly that, like the adulthood rituals of aborigines or of tribal peoples: the boys or girls die on leaving their childhood—in Biblical terms, I Corinthians 13:11: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things.”

I experienced the conversion experience with Lisa Ziegenfelder, a woman I dated while she underwent this experience. She was a tiny woman, raised on Long Island, with a bushy head of hair and the delicate features she inherited from her half-Chinese mother. Her father was Jewish, although not practicing. We met when she came into the

Laundromat where I was washing clothes one evening and, after loading her things into a machine, plopped on the bench next to me—even though we were the only two people in the place—and started talking to me as if she'd known me all her life.

She was a couple years older, had already graduated college, and was trying to decide in what direction her life should turn. We went to clubs and drank wine with her housemates at large, communal dinners. One afternoon as we walked through town, we found a cat that alternated coughs between purrs and was obviously sick. Its coat was silky with vomit, its eyes unfocused. We took it to the vet, who put it down later that day, saying there was nothing he could do for it except to put it out of its misery. Lisa told me later she fell in love with me when, thoughtlessly, I lifted the cat and cradled it while we walked to the vet, stroking it and murmuring in its ear.

I'm not certain when she started attending the Pentecostal church outside town, but it was no secret that Lisa was looking for something outside herself. She took to quoting scripture and stopped drinking. She said we ought not to sleep together any longer until we married, although she usually relented that point. But she hung out less often with me and more often with folks from her church, who had become a kind of reverse-support group. They often expressed to her that she was a bad person, that she knew only bad people—and I was the worst of the lot—and that, rather than attending grad school, which she'd been considering, she ought to stop working altogether, find herself a god-fearing man, and raise his children.

On this last point, I think she decided I could be redeemed. It may have been the shared history we now had—we'd been dating for almost a year—but she seemed to think that, despite the life I led, if I could just be shown the truth I could be that god-

fearing man. She asked me to attend services with her, and I accepted. The church was a ramshackle affair, put up with from cast-offs from building projects the men, who often worked as carpenters, must have done. It was a single room of folding chairs and a single ceiling fan that wobbled as it spun. The preacher was a large, formidable black woman who was interrupted throughout the service by individuals who, touched by the Lord, suddenly stood to sing, dance, or proclaim some gospel. When the preacher called for the newly-saved to step forward to receive anointing, Lisa nudged me hopefully. But I knew I could not do it, even to make her happy, and I smiled and shook my head.

On the drive home she asked me what I'd thought and I made the mistake of telling her the truth. It had been, I said, wonderful theatre and very entertaining. She shut up and stared straight ahead at the road and would not speak another word to me. When she dropped me off at my apartment she ignored my offered kiss and took off without so much as a glance.

The story doesn't really end there because I was young and stupid then and sort of in love. But it does for this purpose. Lisa felt her efforts had been ignored or, worse, derided. This is common among fundamentalists of all stripes. They tend to feel victimized, put upon. Whether the Christian right of the Bush Administration, the Haredi whose members control the Knesset of Ariel Sharon's Israel, or the jama'at of Syria, they see themselves as the oppressed. To an extent, they're right. Because what they are trying to do is to hold back the tide of modernism, which, with its shrinking of the world and peoples of different belief systems shouldering against one another, requires at least a modicum of putting yourself in another person's shoes. But that is to water-down the

religion in their eyes, and despite what many say, they recognize you can't legislate morality.

Or sin. But you can tame it, or tame yourself, which amounts to about the same thing. Fundamentalists are right to this extent: they are victimized, but victimized by themselves. Despite their protestations, it is not God or Jesus or Allah or Yahweh to whom they are finally responsible, but to the concept of themselves they have locked into their hearts and minds.

They are not evil, except to themselves. They are our brothers and sisters, our friends, our parents and grandparents. They are finally as deserving of our sympathy as the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's story "Parker's Back." Parker has married an illiterate Pentecostal country girl, found himself desperately in love with her despite himself, and has had a picture of Jesus tattooed on his back as a kind of homage or an offering to her. At first, Sarah Ruth is simply angry he's been away for days getting new ink, and when he shows her the tattoo she has no idea who it's a picture of. But when he explains its identity to her, she explodes.

"Idolatry!" Sarah Ruth screamed. "Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree? I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!" and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it. Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her bear him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door.

This is the final image I would leave with you of the fundamentalist: a pregnant harridan holding a broom as her only defense against onrushing modernity. But it's not the broom and the blows that leaves Parker at the story's denouement leaning against the yard's sole pecan tree "crying like a baby." It's her rejection, not only of his offering and of him, but of the whole life they could have, them and their coming child, if she would

only see that there is more truth than the single, myopic one to which she clings. This is finally the way we might see fundamentalists. They seem scary, seem powerful, seem monstrous at times. They are finally fighting a losing battle and what we need to recognize if they do not is that they will not survive.

So I went to see her the next morning at her place. We sat on the floor of her room, which used to be decorated with various posters and crystals and large amber necklaces that gave off the scent of myrrh, but now empty except for her bed, a large print of Jesus on the cross, and a scented candle next to her bible. We talked, or I did, she mostly listened or I thought she did, sometimes throwing out a phrase of scripture. At one point I said, “it may be that you’re just so scared you find peace in this.” I still think that’s true in her instance. But she leapt up, shouting, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” over and over, disappearing out the door of the room. I heard the main door slam downstairs and then her car start up and take off.

It still doesn’t end there because I just can’t let things be. I knew where she’d gone: the preacher lived in a house next to the church she’d told me the night before. I hitched a ride out there—it was some miles outside town—and her car was there. I knocked at the door and the preacher filled the doorway. “She doesn’t want to see you,” she said. Now she was not a ranting, god-filled vessel as she had been during the previous night’s service, but a heavy-set black woman who had been put on too often in her life, and really wished these white people would go elsewhere with their relationship problems and just let her sleep. She spoke to me kindly and encouraged me to just go back home and let Lisa be.

Of course I wouldn’t. I asked if she would talk with the two of us together. She rolled her eyes, but said yes. We stood around on the porch, the three of us.