

St. Paul, Minnesota - February 7, 1999
House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Matthew 23:23-28
A Sermon by John M. Miller

Text - "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." - Matthew 23:23

MORALITY AND CIVILITY

Opening Caveat: If anyone agrees with everything I am going to say in this sermon, it will mean that you have not followed the issues I shall be addressing at all closely enough, nor have you thought about it nearly deeply enough. If anyone agrees with none of it, ditto. As a general *modus operandi* for preaching, I have never tried to elicit nor enlist unanimity or agreement with whatever it is I have preached. Anybody who tries to preach only what will be acceptable to everyone will end up preaching sermons which will become acceptable to no one. The result of this is that I know many of you will strongly disagree from the outset with much of what I shall now be saying, but I truly feel it is necessary to say it anyway. And please don't become apoplectic until you have heard me out. Even then, don't become apoplectic; it isn't worth the fuss and frustration. Just chalk it up to the misguided mutterings of a meddling minister.

The subject we shall all be thinking about here most definitely is about politics. However, the central matters to be scrutinized are morality and civility, and how these things are currently playing themselves out in the American political arena. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the elected representatives in Congress from both parties have very consciously made hash out of what should have been and could have been a substantive and meaty issue. For people who keep insisting that they are voting their consciences, it is amazing to learn that there seem to be only party-line Democratic and party-line Republican consciences. Therefore it is absurd for so many politicians to keep making their lofty claims.

The Issue: The question at hand, as you will have guessed from the cover of the bulletin, is the impeachment of the President of the United States by the House of Representatives, and Mr. Clinton's current trial by the Senate. The whole unending brouhaha of the past year has profound implications for underlying trends beneath the surface of American society, as well as obvious concerns which have been raised on the surface.

THE political question of 1998-99 in the USA has many facets. When the highest elected official in the land misbehaves (and only the most hopelessly partisan of Democrats would deny misbehavior altogether), how

ought that to be dealt with? What **ought** we to do? If the misbehavior is not truly illegality but rather impropriety, how should the Republic respond?

A Special Prosecutor was named to address these issues. He has spent tens of millions of taxpayer dollars in an effort to find sufficient evidence to convict the President of high crimes and misdemeanors. He tried to get the goods on the man at 1600 Pennsylvania for fiscal malfeasance (Whitewater), for being an accomplice in a possible murder (Vince Foster), campaign finance finagling, and several other serious allegations.

Clearly William Jefferson Clinton is not as pure as the driven snow. Anybody who believes he is knows almost nothing about our President. Can anyone still imagine he is a man of -- you should pardon the expression -- **unimpeachable** morals and ethics in all areas of his life? I don't think so. But then, not many people are in that rarefied category. I further suspect that God, who knows the heart of every one of us, has yet to find any human being who has ever been morally unimpeachable. If we could save ourselves by stellar good deeds, we would need no Savior. But the Christian faith is founded on a fundamental conviction that God alone, especially through Jesus Christ, is capable of saving us, since it is impossible for us to save ourselves by always doing right. There is no one who is morally invincible.

I am not trying to defend President Clinton. Some of what he has done, especially in his private life, is indefensible. But has that rendered him unfit for the highest office in the land? You don't impeach public officials for immorality, unless what is immoral is also deemed illegal.

Here is a basic question which, it seems to me, has been addressed far too infrequently in this whole sorry saga. **Why, when he tried so many other avenues for uncovering damaging evidence, did Kenneth Starr finally focus solely on concerns over the President's private life?** Does that make any legal sense? Mr. Starr did not get sufficient material to charge the President with any "normal" high crimes and misdemeanors, whatever they might be, so ultimately he spent enormous amounts of time, money, and tedium delving into the President's purported and/or actual sexual escapades. But **why?**

The answer to that question, I think, is quite simple. Mr. Starr couldn't nail his nemesis for anything else, so he reached lower to nail him for his immorality, being unable to prove any illegality. Uncovering nothing else, Kenneth Starr sought - to express it as its basest level, which is very base - to uncover the President himself, literally. He stooped to conquer, and our very bright but sometimes woefully psychologically-challenged chief executive, by lying, was conquered.

"Aha, that's just it!" you exclaim. "Ken Starr has Bill Clinton for perjury and obstruction of justice!" There are many objective legal scholars

who strongly doubt that is so. But even if it is so, these offenses have to do with **sexual misbehavior, not criminal misbehavior**. It was **wrong** for Mr. Starr to put Mr. Clinton on the witness stand regarding sexual relations, however tortuously our President might have attempted to define that term. It even was, if you will, **immoral** for Mr. Starr to do that. Unless you are a moralist, who believes that everyone's private morality is fair game for an assessment of the validity of that person's public service, then you must agree, however reluctantly, that the special prosecutor overstepped his legal bounds. Larry Flynt has cleverly demonstrated the folly of such a moralistic scorched-earth policy.

Therefore, even if the President did commit perjury, which is possible, or obstruct justice, which increasingly seems not very unlikely, given the reams of testimony from every relentlessly badgered witness who has appeared before Kenneth Starr, purported perjury or obstruction of justice for sexual immorality is a very sleazy illegality. It is almost a high crime and misdemeanor to call it a high crime and misdemeanor.

The impeachment trial, currently proceeding with its cynical and politically pernicious snail's-pace course through the Senate, after having gone even more slowly through the House, is not about high crimes or misdemeanors, nor is it about impeachable offenses. It is about **morality**.

What I now shall say may seem primarily to have political overtones, but it is essentially theological in character: The impeachment of the President by the House of Representatives, and his subsequent trial by the Senate, is not nearly as much about politics as it is about a concept of morality which is dangerously skewed. Further, it has been conducted with only the slightest veneer of civility, and in reality this impeachment and subsequent trial is pure artifice. From the viewpoint of the nation's moralists, this is really not even about Bill Clinton. "'No," they would loftily claim, "this is about the soul of America!" To the moralists among us, this is nothing less than a divinely-appointed battle of the Children of Light vs. the Children of Darkness. And make no mistake about it: the true impetus behind all this comes from the Religious Right, unwittingly aided and abetted by loyal Republicans who somehow have overlooked the nature of the battle because of their deep disdain for a President who truly can be deeply disdainable.

The Republican Party, which has a long and noble tradition of fairness and the promotion of individual rights, increasingly has become an unknowing captive of a very well-organized and financed minority within its ranks. Far too few Republicans have spoken out in opposition to the self-anointed Arbiters of American Morality within the GOP. Contrary to what Hillary Clinton charged, this isn't really a vast right-wing conspiracy at all. In its most extreme form, it represents a relatively small percentage of the American people. But it is also a very dedicated, very well-organized, and

very dangerous minority which obviously is beyond the pale of Republicanism who have taken over control of the Republican Party. It is moralists **alone** who have had enough power and/or influence to have dragged out this sorry mess for so long. Only moralistic zealots would have the misplaced energy to threaten the political viability of the Republic in the vain hope that somebody is going to turn up something in these cockamamie Congressional charades. Political zealots should have given up long ago.

Please pay close attention. **Morality** is not only good for society, but absolutely necessary. **Moralists** are usually bad for society, and in the present situation, they are cunningly dangerous. All of us must follow moral laws, but God forbid than any of us should ever become moralists.

Some definitions --- at least by my utterly unbiased, completely objective, definition (and in this tirade you can clearly see I am unbiased and objective): **Moral-ists** are people who believe that morality is the highest form of religion. **Moral-ism** is the deliberate attempt to twist Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or any other kind of faith into an "ism," into a very specific list of do's and don't's. Moralism is the unshakable conviction that our highest duty to God always is to uphold certain very specific moral laws, which **always** are defined by the moralists themselves, and by no one else. **Moral-ism** always leads to in-civility.

To repeat: morality is important. But it is not, nor should it ever be, all-important. There are moral laws God bids all of us to follow, but the following of those laws is not the essence of Christian faith. In fact, our faith requires us to acknowledge that we **don't** always follow those laws, precisely because we **can't**. Sin renders all of us incapable always of doing what we know we should do. Therefore we have no choice other than to trust in God for either our earthly or our heavenly salvation, because God knows we can't pull it off for ourselves in either arena.

However, moralists feel perfectly justified in being uncivil to their enemies, because from their perspective, they alone represent truth, justice, and (in this case) the American Way. To disagree with their position on abortion, homosexuality, the purported divinely-appointed inequality of the sexes, assisted death, right-to-life, and so on, is, by definition, to be in league with the devil. Be certain of this, Republicans, Democrats, or independents of The House of Hope Presbyterian Church: those within the Religious Right secretly revile you, but they will use you very cleverly and skillfully for their own purposes, because they seek complete control of the American political system. If you believe God tells you alone to do something, you will do anything to make it happen. After all, it's God who gives you your orders, isn't it? No right-thinking (note: **right-thinking**) person could deny it!

Jesus of Nazareth was in a constant pitched battle with moralists. As long as He lived (and they made it their business to see that He didn't live very long), He went it at with them hammer and tongs, long day after long day after long day. In Jesus' time the moralists were identified by the terms "scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests." Every verse of Matthew 23, other than the opening one, is a vehement denunciation of these people by Jesus. In our day the scribes and Pharisees may bear such descriptions as the Christian Coalition, the Presbyterian Coalition, or Presbyterians for Biblical Concerns. Beware of people who are concerned that the Bible is not being sufficiently followed; almost never do they sufficiently understand the Bible.

Make no mistake: moralists and moralism killed Jesus Christ. And they did so in the most uncivil of means; they saw to it that Jesus died on a cross. In many ways these people should have been the best and brightest among the people of Israel, but in fact they were the most zealously misguided and cruel. And in many ways the Starrs and Barrs and Hydes and Hutchinsons should be gifted leaders. Instead they have become mean-spirited moralists who are intent on destroying not only the President of the United States but what they believe is an entire corrupt system their myopic eyes see surrounding them.

Perhaps you deduce these people steam me. I certainly hope so. And I certainly hope they steam you too, regardless of where you stand on the political spectrum. Unless you are so far right as to be off the chart (which is hard to believe if you're a member of The House of Hope Presbyterian Church), you should be greatly concerned about what these well-intended but dangerous miscreants are doing.

Bill Clinton is not going to be cast out of the White House. That has been evident from the beginning. Maybe he should have been, but certainly not on the basis of anything put forward in the sorry spectacle through which the special prosecutor and the Religious Right have dragged us, and obviously to no avail. They have prolonged this debilitating debate as long as they can, and even now, they are still unwilling to give it up.

Moralists think what they do improves morality. Quite the contrary: it badly erodes it. For one solid year, the youth of this nation, along with everyone else, have been subjected to X-rated news reports because of the fixated, prurient interests of the Starr Star Chamber. The Religious Right, who have quietly and successfully orchestrated this painfully extended *Gottterdammerung*, are as blind to their legal excesses as the President is to his sexual excesses. They do not understand that it is because of their moralistic fury that this man maintains such popularity. People much prefer winsome rascals to mean-spirited puritans, but they just don't get it.

So what can we do? One thing we can't do is to write our Senators or Congressmen; their minds were made up long ago. They each have their story, and they're doggedly sticking to it. Most of them say they want it over, but they don't get it over.

But here's something you can do. If you identify yourself as a Republican, and I suspect a strong majority of the folks listening to this steamed sermon are Republicans, clearly tell your party officials completely to disengage the party from both the Religious Right and the elected officials who insist on continuing this disastrous debacle. It has become much more lethal to the Republican Party than to Bill Clinton, the longer it has gone on. This vendetta is contrary to the true spirit of the Grand Old Party, and unless it is decisively disavowed, it could prove to be the death knell of the two-party system. That would be a genuine national tragedy. After all, two separate parties seem to be bad enough; one by itself would be catastrophic.

Theologically and christologically, there are many factors for why Jesus ended up on a cross. But historically, there is one primary reason: moralists refused to allow a man to live any longer whom they considered highly irreligious and immoral. If you can't convince moralists that their furious hatred is wrong, then you must fight them, or they will destroy everything they strive so hard to save. Jesus confronted them, and lost. Never, ever forget that. It was the excessively religious who killed the Savior of all humanity, including -- by the grace of God -- the excessively religious.

The impeachment trial of the President of the United States of America is about to grind to its ridiculous denouement, the Lord willing and the creek don't rise no higher. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. But the battle with the moralists will move into an even greater frenzy, because they really, really hate to lose. They are convinced that they alone are on the Lord's side, and they will do anything imaginable, or unimaginable, to accomplish what they mistakenly believe to be His will.

Regarding the opening caveat: if this sermon makes you furious, copies of it are now available on the sermon copy table near the art gallery. Please pick up one and read it in the quiet of your home, apart from the homiletical histrionics of the moment. I hope that then you might calm down.

The President shall survive. Will the nation survive as well?

Prayer - We are a country in deep distress, O God. Grant healing to all Thy people, including those who feel compelled to open wounds. We ask it in the name of the Prince of Peace, who, when He had no other choice, sadly and reluctantly went to war with His enemies. Amen.