

AN ADVENT CHALLENGE: **CHURCH, NAME HERESY**

"In every age the church is called 'to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). The function of the creeds and confessions is to provide standards by which the church can judge and condemn false teachings contrary to the gospel. The church has always found it necessary to draw a dividing line between what is acceptable teaching and what is unacceptable. However, heresy has become virtually outmoded in the modern church.... [Today n]ot heresy but schism became the more serious concern. To prevent heresy from leading to schism the churches today, maintaining their organizational unity at almost all costs, have taken to promoting inclusivity and diversity at the expense of revealed truth and biblical morality, pushing back the limits to heresy, to the point where people are 'tossed to and fro and blown by every wind of doctrine' (Ephesians 4:14).

"One thing is more life-threatening to the church than heresy, and that is the unwillingness or inability to tell the difference between orthodoxy and heresy. Is this distinction truly outmoded....? I do not think so. Retrieving the category of heresy is important if the church is to be clear about its apostolic identity and confession of faith. Without it, orthodoxy becomes an endangered species."— Carl E. Braaten

("The Problem of Authority in the Church" in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, editors, The Catholicity of the Reformation [Eerdmans, 1996], p. 59; quoted by Forum Letter [August 2023], p. 1)

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT LIFE

Welcome to Advent. Welcome to the season when the Church prepares for the coming of Jesus Christ. During the four Sundays and weeks of Advent, we will get ready for the coming of the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

At the end of Advent, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, Jesus Christ will come to the Church, to you, to me. Christ will come to us in whatever way(s) God the Father wants to send Him. He will come as the glorious One to judge the living and the dead. Or as the humble One in a manger, He, as the Word, will enter our hearts and minds. Or as the mysterious One, He will be the "real presence" among us, and for us, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. On Christmas Eve or Day, Jesus Christ will come—however He is sent. Let there be no doubt about that.

The only question is: Will we be ready for His coming? Will our hearts, minds, and lives be ready to receive Him?

One way to help ready our hearts and minds, for the coming of the Savior and Lord, is to consider how the Gospel is about life.

At the beginning of "the story of the world" (Robert W. Jenson, Lutheran theologian, 1930-2017), God creates life—and particularly human life.

Electing Israel to witness to all the peoples of the world, God promises His people both the birth of

generations and the gift of land.

God faithfully sustains the life of His people (and does not abandon or destroy them) throughout their captivity and exile, rebellion and apostasy.

God the Father sends His Son Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, as the Messiah to renew His people and bless all the world.

God the Father, through the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, lifts and gives new life to the poor and the gluttonous, the lowly and the haunted, the broken and the ravaged, the hopeless and the self-righteous, the cowardly and the ruthless.

Through His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus becomes salvation for all whose lives are messed up by sin (and that includes all of us)—upon their repentance and faith and baptism into Christ.

Through Jesus' resurrection from death to life, we too receive new, resurrected life out of sin. That is, God gives us freedom and power to live more and more faithfully with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

God the Spirit, poured out upon the Church and the Christian, leads God's people, wherever and whenever they live, to trust and obey God, and continue living abundantly and serving faithfully.

God the Father promises to send His Son, in the power of the Spirit, at The End of Time, to destroy all sin, evil, and death—and to establish the perfect, peaceable Kingdom to enjoy forever.

That is the Church's story of the world, in brief. That story is about life, human life, its creation and redemption, protection and perfection.

Tell that story, and you are committed to defending human lives—especially the weakest among us.

Live that story, and you would never think about taking the lives of little, hidden ones (unborn children), or vulnerable ones (the chronically ill, the deeply confused, or the dying).

Yes, the Gospel really is the Gospel of Life. Hear it! Trust it! Live your life in ways that protect others!

In the Name of the God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who live and love—so that we might live and love. Amen. (PTS) ♥

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FORSAKING THE GOSPEL: A TESTIMONY

by Rev. James A. Seelhorst

As an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, I am confronted with the decision of whether or not to disaffiliate from those with and for whom I have served. This decision is difficult and painful. After all, my brothers and sisters and I have lived through life and ministry together and developed bonds. That is not trivial.

While I went on honorable location almost fifteen years ago, after an extended family leave, I still value the meaningful relationships of my former colleagues during approximately twenty years of pastoral ministry. I also value the relationships of those in the congregation in which I have located.

My Story

Even so, I find The United Methodist Church has changed from how it ministered to me when I put Christ first in my life. Though reared in a Methodist congregation, I had become estranged from the church and my family. I did not profess a sincere commitment to follow Christ until my first year at a state university.

Because of many traumatic family and social circumstances, some innocently committed and others intentionally, I experienced a lot of harm growing up. Suffice it to say (indeed too briefly), the feeling of rejection—after being told by parents I was supposed to be a girl, being abused emotionally by an extended-family member, and being bullied for years by peers—left me battered and broken, with a lot of anger and damaged emotions.

By the time I was in high school, unbeknown to others, I had become suicidal (then homicidal) and came so close to following through quite a few times in various ways. I was only able to move past these especially difficult urges by not wanting to put my family through it. Nevertheless, toward the end of my first year at the university, I had again come to feel so utterly alone, extremely broken, unloved, and thoroughly unlovable that I began to reconsider.

At that point, I decided to give God my last chance. I did not expect much to happen the evening I prayed to put Jesus Christ first. But when I cried out from my heart, giving what was left of my broken life to the Lord and to

follow Him, an amazing experience occurred. Oh, the divine love that flooded my soul. I realized, “I am loved! I am lovable!”

A Long Healing

After basking for a moment in the joy of God's acceptance and presence, I then asked, “Will I be healed now?” For I knew I was so messed up.

I then sensed such a loving, reassuring, yet disappointing answer from the Lord. “Yes, but it's going to take a while.”

And indeed it has. I wanted healing to be quick. Who doesn't? And while the gift of the Father's grace through faith in Jesus Christ redeemed me from sin and death, and it is by Christ's stripes we are healed, it has taken years of much prayer, repentance, counseling, loving care of others, and nurturing work of the Holy Spirit for me to face the pain and see that gracious healing come to fruition in restoring my severely damaged emotions and interpersonal struggles on my journey toward wholeness.

In the process of sanctification it can take time to hit the mark, to confess how one is sinful and broken, to cease blaming others and accept responsibility in finding healing, to let go of resentment and anger, to forgive, to develop a healthy self-esteem and self-concept, to learn healthy ways of relating, to trust others, to find freedom from addictive behaviors, to be secure in myself and in God's acceptance and in whom God created me to be, to stop reciting all the lies I had come to believe about myself, to let go of selfish and controlling ways, to repent, to be transformed by the renewal of my mind, to love myself as God loves me, to love others as I love myself, to be conformed to the image of Christ, and to live by the Spirit rather than my flesh.

I have had so many expressions of sin and brokenness in my life. Those who have known me could probably tell by my various and not always subtle, contradictory behaviors. It is a testimony to the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God that I was able to experience enough healing and restoration, and be whole enough to serve local churches capably for as long as I did, as well as care for my family as much as I did. Nevertheless, after nearly two decades, I had come to realize that I could not lead congregations past where I was, or be the husband and father my family needed, without time off for further repentance, healing and restoration. So at the same time that my wife suffered an acute, life-threatening illness, and we were faced with an appointment change, I took a leave from pastoring.

Yet life and an extended crisis of faith got in the way of me finding more grace in a timely fashion, and I never felt competent enough to return to pastoral ministry. And only now have I come to the point where I can and must share publicly and more completely of what God has been working in my life.

Honest about Myself

This brings me to where the latest issues surrounding human sexuality and identity within the church get personal. For nearly as far back as I could remember growing up, I had a transgender identity because I thought I was supposed to be a girl. And by high school, I had concluded that I had a homosexual orientation as well. (Note: Through the years I have only shared this part of my

journey privately with persons who might be helped by knowing it, or needed to know, yet not with many close to me, because of a deep-seated fear of more hurt and rejection, especially from my parents.)

However, I came to realize during my journey toward wholeness that my sexual identity and orientation were just a couple of many expressions of the sin, brokenness and damaged emotions in my life. As I was experiencing deliverance, healing and transformation in so many ways and areas of my life, I was also experiencing deliverance, healing and transformation with these aspects as well. In fact, all of my thoughts, words and deeds as well as my desires, affections, insecurities and identity have undergone change as I repent and experience sanctification.

Clearly, my overall healing and restoration, as God said it would, have taken a while. Indeed, my search to find the grace of sanctification has been a tedious and sometimes difficult and painful process, and not only for me but for my family as well. In fact, I have found that the roots of brokenness can grow deeply into many areas of one's fallen nature and affect many aspects of living, and consequently take time to root out. But I know that healing, restoration and change do come, as we instead ever become rooted and grounded, and grow in a love that surpasses knowledge, and as we are filled with all the fullness of God. I can attest that God works all things for good so that we would perform good works and walk with newness in every area of life. As John Wesley said, by grace we shall be wholly renewed. We shall go on from faith to faith until our whole sickness be healed.

Honest about the Church

But now I am dismayed. At the beginning of my journey as I was being discipled and then exploring ministry, those around me in The United Methodist Church showed me Godly love and a genuine compassion that not only encouraged me but also held me responsible and Scripturally accountable to what it means to be a follower and servant of Jesus Christ.

Now however, I see that if I was beginning my healing process today, I am afraid The United Methodist Church would totally miss the mark as to what I needed and what God was working in my life. I suspect The United Methodist Church, much like the world today, would be so distracted by my sexual issues and my need for what is called compassionate "gender-affirming care" that my sin nature and all of my other areas of brokenness would be pretty much swept under the rug. That they would be considered minor issues, having little if any significant role, consequence or formative influence in my life.

I know I would be asked to deny the authority of Scripture and to perform enlightened mental gymnastics, to re-interpret Scriptural revelations about sexuality and to accept that they only address ancient religious and cultural practices that are irrelevant today. Yet the foolish distortions of creation in culture back then were also considered rational and wise by those who were missing the mark. In this fallen world, whenever we fail to acknowledge our Creator and honor God with thanksgiving, we can be given up to the systemic brokenness that clouds our reasoning.

And would I also be told that I was born that way, that

other peoples' hatred was the problem, and that I had little need of counseling, therapy, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness? Indeed, would sin even be mentioned? Consequently, what would be made of the just but merciful Father, the redemptive and healing power of Jesus Christ, and the nurturing of the Holy Spirit who through the grace of sanctification enables and empowers any renewal and transformation? Or would I simply be told that because God loves me, I just need to be reconciled to how I was, be proud of whom I am and leave it at that?

It seems The United Methodist Church today no longer shapes culture, but rather has been shaped by culture.

To the contrary, I thankfully witness God's continual, loving, restorative and transforming presence, which ever shapes us into becoming something new and good, even when I miss the mark in so many ways. I gratefully write of a God who ever redeems, heals, and frees us from the sin, lies, brokenness, harm, and misery we can propagate and become captive to. I humbly testify of the God who works in every aspect of life so that we might be made new and become whole.

Parroting what the world says about life falls far short of proclaiming the Good News of a just but gracious, merciful, and steadfastly loving God, who created us and works in us to be so much more than what a fallen world could ever imagine or offer us.

As much as I love and appreciate those with and for whom I served in The United Methodist Church, I want to affiliate with those who, in faith, embrace the hope and proclaim a message of divine love that not just redeems but also transforms and restores.

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WHAT A DISSENTER SHOULD DO: SIT DOWN, QUIET DOWN, AND STUDY HARD

The following transcript of a conversation, between Rev. Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009, first a Lutheran pastor, later a Catholic priest) and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (1927-2022, then the CEO of doctrine at the Vatican, later Pope Benedict XVI), served as a devotional at the North Carolina Conference's annual retreat for retired pastors and their spouses in September. The following exchange originally took place at the Biblical Interpretation in Crisis Conference, during January of 1988, at the Lotos Club in New York City. The content of the conference, including this conversation, was later published as the book Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church (Eerdmans, 1989).

The conversation that follows is relevant to Methodism today. Most often, when United Methodist and Global Methodist theologians—sometimes called "Wesleyan scholars"—"discover" new teaching in the Bible that contradicts traditional Christian teaching, they rush to the media, engage in hurry-up interviews, write articles and books about their new-found discovery, and generally bask in public attention.

Back in 1988, Cardinal Ratzinger counseled dissenters to take a quite different path, a more faithful way. His is a way that acknowledges the Lordship of Jesus Christ over His Church—not the fickle scholarship of theologians increasing their fan base.

Richard John Neuhaus: Suppose that I am a Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, that I am very much a believer, that I have made a theological choice obedient to the church, and that I understand that the Bible is the book of the church. Furthermore, suppose that my research is to find out, as best I can, what it is that these texts mean in a very comprehensive sense, or what they are witnessing to. As this believing, theologically decided, New Testament scholar, I come to the conclusion that...the church order...which has the best claim of being called a New Testament church order, is not the order of my church....

What then do I, as a New Testament scholar, do? What would you, Cardinal Ratzinger, ask me to do...? As a theologian, what would you ask me to do?...

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: You must distinguish between not finding something [in the New Testament] and finding something [in the New Testament] that is contradictory. That is decisive. A Catholic can perhaps accept answers of the faith that he cannot find clearly in the New Testament. But a Catholic can never believe that there is a contradictory position between the Catholic faith and the New Testament.

Often...before the Roman Catholic Church decided an issue, and that could take centuries, it was legitimate for Catholics to hold a variety of positions on that issue. When the church held an immature stance, doctrinal development was in order. But when the church reached a consensual decision, that marked a new day, because the church is not just one exegete among other exegetes.

If you, as a biblical scholar, believe that the church is teaching contrary to the New Testament, then you must ask if your certitude is well founded and is absolutely clear. With your private intelligence, reflections, and historical erudition, if you can say, “This is absolutely clear—the church is in contradiction with the New Testament,” and if at the same time one is really conscious of the limits of human thinking....

Neuhaus: That is a counsel to humility, is it not?....

Ratzinger: If the person is sufficiently intelligent to say, “I, with my limited capacity, found it,” then the same person will be able to say, “I must continue my reflecting and thinking.”...There are times in the church where the intellectual situation makes it nearly impossible to find coherence. In this situation we should encourage confidence in the church and continue to search for coherence between faith and thinking. Also we should have the patience to say, “I am not able to find the convincing synthesis, but I see the importance and the inner logic of the faith. And since these are the problems of our time, I must tolerate the situation and continue to be a faithful thinker in search of the synthesis....

Neuhaus: While one is waiting for that resolution, would one remain silent, as a scholar, about what one believes to be the case?

Ratzinger: Normally, you have to be patient and continue in your reflecting on and believing in the Bible. This can present nuances for one’s thinking. If you cannot find

anything supportive of the church’s doctrine, and if you find absolute evidence for your idea, then you must convert. But before you say, “I have evidence that the New Testament is opposed to the faith of the church,” you must have lots of patience, humility, and new thinking....

The process of patience implies that you are not only a good [person], a patient [person], but also that you continue with the will to find better evidence and relativize your own evidence...So, the church says to the one in opposition, “Be patient, but actively patient, in your work to relativize your evidence.”

Neuhaus: And desire agreement with the magisterium.

Ratzinger: Yes.

Elizabeth Achtemeier (1926-2002, taught Old Testament and preaching at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond): Should Luther have kept quiet and waited?

Ratzinger: In a Catholic vision, yes.

All around the conference table: [Smiling and chuckling.]

The devotional drew to a close with the singing of two verses of “The Church’s One Foundation.” The following lyrics rang in our Methodist hearts and minds.

“Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,/she waits the consummation of peace forevermore;/till, with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,/and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.” (UMH, #545)

“The church shall never perish, her dear Lord to defend/To guide, sustain and cherish, is with her to the end./Though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale;/Against a foe or traitor, she ever shall prevail.” (Indelible Grace Hymnbook website, words by Samuel J. Stone)

To conclude, we prayed for the Church in one voice: “O gracious God, we pray for your holy Church universal, that you would be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever lives to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.” (The Book of Common Prayer and The United Methodist Book of Worship, #501) (PTS) ♥

2020 ABORTION STATISTICS

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] publishes abortion statistics for each year. Except for California, Maryland, and New Hampshire, all fifty states report their annual abortion statistics to the CDC. In addition, the District of Columbia and New York City submit their numbers.

On November 25, 2022, the CDC released Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2020, which reports abortions in 2020. According to the CDC, in 2020, 620,327 abortions were performed in in the United States (minus three states, as noted above). Consider that: over 600,000 surgical abortions in one year. That is 1,700 surgical abortions/per day—every day of the year.

Forty-one reporting areas included data on the ages (i.e., “weeks of gestation”) of the aborted little ones. Below,

following each gestational age, are the abortion totals and percentages for that age:

1-6 weeks: 211,594 abortions/45.3% of abortions;
7-9 weeks: 166,202 abortions/35.6% of abortions;
10-13 weeks: 57,108 abortions/12.2% of abortions;
14-15 weeks: 12,830 abortions/2.7% of abortions;
16-17 weeks: 7,456 abortions/1.6% of abortions;
18-20 weeks: 7,154 abortions/1.5% of abortions; and
21-36 weeks: 4,382 abortions/0.9% of abortions.

As indicated by these numbers and by commonsense, most reported abortions occur during the earliest weeks of pregnancy. These numbers demonstrate why legislatures' decisions about where to draw the line and disallow most (or all) abortions—at 6 weeks, 12 weeks, 15 weeks, or whenever—are so important. Such line-drawing can save, or sacrifice, many lives of little ones. This explains why some legislators are courageously committed to pushing for pro-life legislation that aims to protect the youngest of the little ones—because so many of them, who are now being aborted, can be saved from that dreadful fate. (PTS) ♥

PLANNED PARENTHOOD KEEPS KILLING

According to its 2021-2022 Annual Report, Planned Parenthood took the lives of 374,155 unborn children in the United States. Since most Planned Parenthood facilities are closed on Sunday, its Monday-through-Saturday clinics performed nearly 1,200 abortions in America per day. The Annual Report also reveals that, for every pregnancy that Planned Parenthood helped bring to birth, it intentionally ended the lives of 60 unborn children. Ten years ago, Planned Parenthood saw 3,000,000 patients per year, and about 10% of the patients were intent on abortion. Now Planned Parenthood sees around 2,000,000 patients, and 16-20% are headed toward abortion. (Samantha Farnsworth, "Planned Parenthood's Figures Show It Kills 1,200 Babies Every Day in Abortions," LifeNews.com, August 1, 2023) Not a pretty picture. ♥

LIBERATING WOMEN FROM THE LIE

Dr. Susan Bane is an ob-gyn, a professor at Barton College, and the medical director of Choices Women's Center in Wilson, NC. She recently wrote: "Ending the life of our pre-born children goes against everything we are as women. As author Laura Garcia reminds us, women have maternal instincts and are natural mothers, whether to their biological children or others. We touch lives through our ability to nurture and desire to help others reach their fullest potential. We are naturally concerned for the good of others, and this innate caring we share is one of the reasons women often choose professions that involve nurturing such as nursing, teaching and counseling.

"Women need liberation from the lie of 'my body, my choice.' The oppressive message of 'my body, my choice' needs to be buried with the 63,000,000 pre-born children who have died since Roe v. Wade was [handed down] in 1973. 'My body, my choice' is an empty and

deceitful mantra that is falsely portrayed as empowering. It goes against all that is good about humanity to preach empowerment by ending the life of another human being, much less the life of your very own child.

"'My body, my choice' creates a culture of death as a solution for women. It does nothing to address the barriers women face with an unplanned pregnancy. It does nothing for women who often feel trapped and forced to choose induced abortion against their will. It does nothing to address the truth that many women tell us—that under different circumstances, they would not make this choice.

"Let us revolutionize our culture and change these circumstances for women. Yes, we need to address root causes as to why so many women experience unplanned pregnancies. But, once pregnant, a woman should never be forced to give permission for an abortionist to intentionally end her child's life.

"'My body, my choice' needs to be replaced with 'my baby, my chance.' It is time for the contemporary society to empower women to make a life-affirming decision—parenting or adoption. An unexpected positive pregnancy test then becomes an opportunity..., an opportunity for her innate ability to love to surface so she could confidently wrap her heart and arms around her child." ("Replacing 'my body, my choice' with 'my baby, my chance,'" The Wilson Times, wilsontimes.com, August 15, 2023, p. 8B [print edition]) ♥

TROUBLING POLITICAL TRENDS

Deprogram 'Em

Hillary Clinton, a staunchly pro-choice Democrat, cannot get over losing the 2016 presidential election. (Just like Donald Trump, a generally pro-life Republican, cannot get over losing the 2020 election.) After marinating in her loss to Trump for seven years, Clinton recently and seriously declared to CNN: "You know, maybe there needs to be a formal deprogramming of the [Trump] cult members." In response, the journalist—true journalist!—Matt Taibbi notes "that people like Hillary seem increasingly unmoored from reality, as well as willfully deaf to the political consequences of their words." ("Have They Gone Mad?," Racket News, at racket.news, October 6, 2023)

Two additional points should be made about Hillary Clinton's deprogramming statement. First, implementing a Clinton-inspired deprogramming program would require a tyrannical amount of political power. Evidently, Ms. Clinton would be willing to justify accumulating and exercising such tyrannical power. Second, in her deprogramming statement, Ms. Clinton is suggesting that reasonable argument and persuasion, in public discourse, cannot convince her opposition. She believes, after all, that her opposition is cultish, fanatical, and not open to reason—that they can be transformed only by deprogramming. However, could it also be that she does not have the necessary facts, arguments, and disposition that are required to convince her opponents to come over to her side of the aisle?

Or Just Call 'Em "Extremists"/"Terrorists"

Now turn to the Newsweek article "Donald Trump

Followers Targeted by FBI as 2024 Election Nears” (William M. Arkin, 10/04/2023). The article’s first paragraph reads: “The federal government believes that the threat of violence and major civil disturbances around the 2024 U.S. presidential election is so great that it has quietly created a new category of extremists that it seeks to track and counter: Donald Trump’s army of MAGA followers.” There has been related evidence of the FBI targeting pro-life activists, school-board activists, and traditional Roman Catholics.

Here, a review of governmental rhetoric is helpful. The FBI often invokes the phrase “domestic violent extremists.” The current administration speaks regularly about “domestic terrorism.” Without using those phrases, President Biden can multiply their influence; for example, he tweeted last September: “Donald Trump and MAGA Republicans are a threat to the very soul of this country. MAGA Republicans aim to question not only the legitimacy of past elections but elections being held now and into the future.”

Definitions behind the rhetoric are significant. The FBI co-authored a report that shifted the definition of AGAAVE (anti-government, anti-authority violent extremism) from “furtherance of ideological agendas” to “furtherance of political and/or social agendas.” Arkin, the Newsweek journalist, noted: “For the first time, [AGAAVE] groups could be so labeled because of their politics.” So days after the infamous January 6, “Trump and his army of supporters were acknowledged [by the FBI] as a distinct category of domestic violent extremists....”

A civilian, ex-governmental expert on terrorism questioned applying the word “terrorism” to a domestic, political group: “It seems to me that the very word terrorism is more representative of the state of our discourse than a description of the threat. Is political violence on the rise in America? Yes, it is. But everything that is extreme is on the rise, whereas terrorism, [which is] violence intended to bring America to its knees or overthrow the state, really doesn’t exist. One might not like that so many reject the current political order, but they are still trying to get their candidate elected, not pull off some coup to overthrow the government. That never happened on January 6th and despite even a president like Donald Trump, it’s not possible in America.” Another expert prefers the term “domestic political violence” rather than the hyperbolic phrase “domestic terrorism.”

[After viewing videos of Hamas’ terrorism against Jews on October 7, 2023, and after remembering Islamism’s terrorism against the United States on 9/11, one can recall the actual appearance of terrorism and its horror. Then the partisan-political uses of the word “terrorism,” that are routinely occurring in American life today, can be set aside.]

The Newsweek article quotes an official who criticizes the present administration’s attention to this matter: “The senior intelligence official who works at the Office of the Director of National intelligence said Biden’s rhetoric on domestic terrorism could goad his opponents into taking more extreme action—particularly those who have now lost their faith in elections or believe the system is rigged against them.”

Let us hope that, poking the bear to see if the bear will become violent, is not the motivation for the targeting of

possible Trump supporters. Whatever, the poking needs to stop. American government, its institutions and its agencies, should never go after American citizens for partisan-political reasons. That violates the United States Constitution. Constitutional freedoms must be preserved. After all, they help the Gospel of Life go forth in word and deed throughout the world. They help the Gospel of Life to be spoken and heard, demonstrated and seen, trusted and obeyed and spread. (PTS) ♥

JUSTIFYING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

On June 22-26, the University of Chicago asked a sampling of the American people if force is “justified” in attempting to accomplish political goals. The Chicago study found that, from January 2023 to June 2023, the justification of political violence rose. “The study also reports that ‘the rise was sharpest among Democrats where it grew by about 2.5 times.’” “Furthermore, Democrats were...more likely to have voiced ‘radical, expressly violent support’ for political violence in order to restore abortion rights in the country. According to the study, public support for violence in order ‘to restore the federal right to abortion grew from 8 percent in January 2023 to 12 percent as of June 26, 2023.... The increase was sharpest among Democrats, doubling over the past 6 months from 8 to 16 percent.’” This study is uncovering what is behind pro-life witnesses, pregnancy centers, and churches being routinely attacked by pro-choice/pro-abortion activists. (Sarah Prentice, “More Democrats Think Violent Force Is Justified to Support Abortion,” July 28, 2023, LifeNews.com) ♥

EMAIL TO DR. SLEETH

The 2023 Lifewatch Sermon was especially outstanding. Preached by Dr. Matthew Sleeth, the sermon was entitled “Hope Always: How to Be a Force for Life in a Culture of Suicide.” Culture-of-life resources by Dr. Sleeth can be accessed at blessedearth.org and matthewsleethmd.org.

(The March 1, 2023 issue of Lifewatch led with Dr. Sleeth’s sermon. It also mistakenly notes Sleeth’s website. Thanks to Mrs. Patti Brown of Morehead City, NC for catching this error.)

Mrs. Brown responded to Dr. Sleeth with a particularly informative and moving email. She wrote: “I read your 2023 Lifewatch Sermon with great interest. You see, there is not much in my life about which I am an expert, but the aftermath of suicide is one of those things. Someone at the American Association of Suicidology once told me I may well hold the Guinness Book of World Records for suicide impact. At the time of that call, the count was up to 13, if I counted the attempted as well as completed suicides around me: family, friends, and colleagues. (Just between my senior year in high school and the start of my sophomore year in college, I dealt with 3. Nothing shocks quite like walking into your dorm room and finding your roommate on the floor, with a suicide note scrawled in lipstick on her mirror. And then to have my beloved faculty advisor, to whom I turned for help in that situation, later take his own life was incomprehensible....)

“We may live in a culture of suicide, but I think suicide is nonetheless the last great taboo in our culture. In a

society where almost anything is talked about and analyzed to death, there is an eerie quiet when it comes to suicide. Perhaps because it's easy to be angry at the person who murdered someone you know. But it's much harder to handle that anger when the person who killed your loved one is your loved one. That really messes with your head!

"One thing I rarely hear mentioned is the risk to children of suicides. I think a parent's suicide risks giving permission to a child, regardless of age, to follow suit at some time. My father took his own life when I was 36. I have likened that to having a 50 megaton nuclear warhead explode on the landscape of my life. I have never been the same person since (and I'm now 69). For years after Dad died, I would experience periods I referred to as the 'black times,' when an almost smothering depression would envelop me for no reason I could find. In those times the enemy of my soul would whisper, 'It's okay to do what he did. After all, he was your father so it must have been okay.' It took a lot of prayer and a good faith-based SOS group to silence that voice and stop the black times. Thanks be to God!

"Just needed to share that perspective. Thanks for the good work you're doing."

Mrs. Brown is also the author of Obedience: The Joyful Discipline (2021), which was reviewed in the March 1, 2022 issue of Lifewatch. Disciples of Jesus Christ dedicated to "going on to perfection" will find Obedience a very helpful book. ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

● **Hamas' barbarous slaughter of Jews**, on October 7, should cause every Christian Church and every Christian ministry to stand in solidarity with Jews and with Israel. After all, the Gospel of Jesus Christ emerges from the people God promised to Abraham. Standing with Jews and with Israel, Lifewatch uncompromisingly and strongly declares: No to anti-Semitism, and No to terrorism. Anti-Semitism and terrorism are always evil—never morally justifiable. Anti-Semitism and terrorism are crimes against humanity and rebellions against God. Pray for the Middle East: that justice would be done and that peace would come.

● **A well meaning pastor and friend once said to your scribe:** "For weeks, Sarah, one of my beloved church members, has been in the hospital for several weeks. Elderly, she is not now receiving food and water. Dying, she lays motionless in her bed. That is not really Sarah in

that hospital bed." Well, as a matter of fact, the Sarah in the hospital bed actually was the Sarah the pastor had known for years. The withholding of food and water from her diminished and debilitated and devastated her, but she remained Sarah. It is just that American medicine and its go-alongs intentionally conspired to kill this woman. Probably under the banner of compassion. But is that compassion?

The Ramsey Colloquium—named after Paul Ramsey, a United Methodist who was a Christian ethicist, who taught at Princeton University for decades—had a rule of thumb for truly Christian care for the dying: **"Always to care, never to kill."** (See the February 1992 First Things article by that title at firstthings.com.) The message of this rule is clear: The declining and dying should never be intentionally killed; they should always be cared for, and their care should include the provision of food and water (even by IV) until the end of their days. That moral principle does not answer all end-of-life moral questions, but it does take some vicious answers and options off the table.

● **A diving accident made Joni Eareckson Tada a quadriplegic.** For years, her suffering has been great. But because of life in Christ, her joy has been greater. "[T]housands of people have been touched by her life, some even given hope to live.... Tada recognizes the days ahead are marked by suffering and degeneration in this fallen world. But instead of turning to death, she flees to Jesus for relief. Her response to pain and suffering is in stark contrast to the secular perspective. 'He has chosen not to heal me, but to hold me. The more intense the pain, the closer His embrace.'" (Hannah Tu, "Killing People in Assisted Suicides Is Not Dignified or Beautiful," LifeNews.com, August 1, 2023)

● **Here is a question to discuss at your next Worship Committee meeting:** Is a Service of Worship, that lacks Confession/Pardon/Peace, unfaithful to the Church's faith and to the Gospel? This pastor votes Yes. How can a faithful Service of Worship possibly be oblivious to our fallenness and sin, God's transforming forgiveness in His Son crucified and risen, and the joy of salvation and a new start? If a congregation is going to teach Christian truth about life and abortion, marriage and human sexuality, that church at worship must be ready, willing, and able to meet the repentant with the Gospel of forgiveness. If it lacks the Gospel of forgiveness, a congregation will simply avoid matters related to life, abortion, marriage, and sexuality. Pastors and laity, make sure that Confession/Pardon/Peace are a part of every Service of Worship that takes place in

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your sanctuary. The Gospel of Life must include the Gospel of forgiveness.

- **“Don’t believe the headlines:** a Nebraska teen didn’t go to jail for having an abortion” appeared on the America magazine website on August 18, 2023. The article was mentioned on The Loop, CatholicVote’s excellent, daily summary of the most important, most recent news stories. Written by Mary Hallan FioRito of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC, the America article recounts the truth about an incident that was forced into a predetermined, pro-choice/pro-abortion narrative by outlets in the so-called mainstream media. FioRito concludes her article in a most stirring

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way: “In the year following [the United States Supreme Court’s] Dobbs [decision], accurate reporting on any story even remotely tangential to abortion is not to be expected, to the detriment of the people in whose hands state abortion law now rests.” So true. So sad. So harmful.

• **Global Methodists and United Methodists can be increased in faithfulness** to Christ and His Church by watching, and taking to heart, the video “Speaking the Truth in Love: Christianity & Homosexuality” by Father Paul Scalia. (To locate this video online, go to YouTube and then do a YouTube search for “Speaking the Truth in Love: Christianity & Homosexuality by Scalia.” Fr. Scalia’s presentation is sponsored by the Institute of Catholic Culture. A son of United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonin Scalia (1936-2016), Fr. Scalia offers thoughtful, loving, Biblical teaching intended for clergy and laity of all churches. In other words, Fr. Scalia proposes teaching to the whole Church, to the Church catholic. Watch it today. Do not procrastinate. And encourage others to do the same.

- *Vulnerari praesidio.* “Protect the most vulnerable.”
- *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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