

Two and One-Half Billion

Romans 10:14a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever looked at the complex problems of the world and wondered, "Is there any one foundational truth that could be the key to all of them?" Our world is so fragmented that it almost seems to us impossible that that could be so. I would like to share a fundamental, basic truth with you that I believe is the key to all the complex problems of the world, and to examine it together and apply it to some of these problems.

The truth that would solve every problem in our world is this: that there is a Creator who loves us, and we can be like him and love him. That is it, loved ones. It is the failure to see that truth that has caused all the problems, big and small, national and personal, in our world. It is the failure to see that Jesus is the unique Son and is a perfect picture of what our Creator's attitude is to us. The failure to see those twin facts has caused all the problems, great and small, in our world.

That is why God says these words to us in Romans 10:14: "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"

Let's look at Iran. In Iran there are 35 million Muslims who have some of the most sophisticated weapons in existence at their disposal. They have control of an energy source by which they can cripple the industrial nations of the world. Why are they running around their streets, with revolvers in their hands, crowding into a certain city to touch the hand of an old ascetic Ayatollah? Why are they preoccupied with, of all problems, whether the women should wear veils or not? [This message was spoken in 1980 – the time of the Iranian Revolution.]

It seems to me that is one of the most bizarre and complex problems of the many complicated situations in our world. Why is that happening? Well, loved ones, the 35 million Iranians are predominantly Muslim. They, of course, believe that there is a Creator, Allah. They believe that they ought to be able to know him and in some sense they should be like him. But they don't know how to be like him. That is why they are attracted to Muslim basics and the ascetic separation from the world of this Ayatollah Khomeini.

Somehow they feel that faith in Allah should not produce the injustice and the greed that they sense was so much part of the so-called Islamic attempt of the Shah to modernize and westernize Iran. Yet they sense in their own dear hearts that it should be something different from arguing about whether the women wear veils or not. But they are not sure -- so they end up in the confused state in which you and I see them.

Now you can see that the real battle that they are having is: how can we be like our Creator? That is the real challenge. How do you live by God's order instead of by the world's disorder?

Of course, Ayatollah Khomeini has seen that one of the big problems all of us have in depending on God is that we are so dependent upon and close to the world of men and circumstances. So like all religious ascetics, he has solved the problem by saying, "If my dependence upon the world and my

preoccupation with what people think of me prevent me depending on my God and being like my God, then I will simply withdraw from that world."

That is what all ascetics do. They say, "The world has a hold on me. I am preoccupied with what people think of me. I am preoccupied with whether the world gives me enough money for my security – and that is disturbing my peace. I will make the world go away. I will withdraw to a mountain or a holy city."

Yet it creates a problem, because when you withdraw from the world you can't affect it in any way. You leave a tremendous vacuum into which more and more disorder fills in. So the Iranians are confused.

We don't want the injustice, the unfairness, and the greed that we saw as men have attempted to bring the world into order. So maybe this asceticism is the answer. Of course, we know that it really isn't an answer. We know that it won't be long before the Ayatollah loses any influence that he has on events.

Loved ones, that is the difficulty. How can you be like God and yet be in the midst of world events? How can you be like God unless you withdraw from those events? So the Iranians are trying to find an answer to it.

The Ayatollah Khomeini is an example of a problem that starts further back than him. The failure of the Ayatollah and the Shah to set forth clearly what God is like -- their vagueness about the God "Allah" whom they worship, and above all the failures of the Muslim prophets and kings to be like their God -- starts further back. One of the problems with asceticism is that when you withdraw from the world, you don't become more like God. Strangely enough, you fall into a pattern of legalism where you become preoccupied with ritualistic righteousness – with how to pray right and how to dress right. So asceticism -- withdrawing from the world -- doesn't make you more like God. It only makes you a strange kind of person.

Now that started further back than Khomeini or the Shah of Iran. It started with the dear one who founded the Islamic religion five hundred years after Jesus' resurrection.

What had happened was that many Christians believed that Jesus' death was a miracle by which God wanted to change them and make them like God and make them loving people. But many other Christians around the time of Mohammed believed that Jesus' death was simply an excuse or a bribe to God so that he would forgive them for not being like him.

Many of those Christians who refused to be changed by Jesus' death refused to die with him -- to the influence that the world has over us, to people's opinions, and to the dependence on money for their security. Many of those Christians who refused to be identified with Jesus in his death and to die to the things that we depend on in this world, went abroad as missionaries to convert people to the Christian religion. When they came to the Eastern peoples many simply exploited them. Many of the missionaries forced them in an Old Testament way to worship our national god -- the god of the West.

Do you see how unattractive that was to people in the east? Men like Mohammed said to themselves, "I don't want this ugly, ungodly, greedy Christ. I don't want this Christ who doesn't change people's lives, and who makes people exploit us and be greedy and avaricious."

So he called the Arabs back to their forefather Abraham, who begat Ishmael, the head of the Arab families. Mohammed called them back to the Old Testament God of Abraham and said, "Here is a god who will be our god. These Westerners want us to take their western God. We will have our own God."

The tragedy was that without Christ, and without his miraculous death to change their human natures, all that the dear Islamic people ended up with was a kind of Old Testament religion that was full of legalism and nationalism and was powerless to change them. That is what throws our dear Iranian brothers and sisters into the situation that they are in today. They don't know how to become like their God.

They have this dear Ayatollah on the one side who is divorcing himself completely from the realities of the situation, and on the other side they have a government that is limping along and presumably will move eventually to sheer expedience. In between, the people are hoping against hope that there must be some way to live like Allah and be like him.

Now what can we do? What can you and I do to help the loved ones in Iran? We could try to tackle the symptoms of their problem, try to rectify the injustices, and try to deal with the greed for the next fifty years. But meanwhile, thousands of loved ones in Iran would die never knowing there is a Creator who loves them, never knowing that they can be made like him. They'd never know that they can love him themselves and that there is a great miracle on Calvary by which they themselves are transformed and changed, by which they can be freed from their preoccupation with what people think. They'd never know they can begin to depend on God alone for what he thinks.

Never would they experience the self-esteem and sense of worth that comes from depending on God alone for their love. They would never experience the power of God's life that comes into them, which enables them to affect and change the disorder around them. If you and I decide to give our lives to simply changing the injustice and greed in their society, they would never know those things, because they would never hear them from anybody who lives them in their lives and hearts.

This verse is so plain and obvious to all of us. "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" Most of them have never heard, or if they have heard at all, they have heard from Westerners who were not made like Jesus himself -- un-Christ-like, ungodly people who did not remind these people of Allah at all. "And how are they to hear without a preacher?" These verses point out to us what we are obviously meant to do.

What are we doing? Some of us who say we are God's children spend our days wringing our hands about the terrible state of the world. Others of us philosophize about whether these drowning millions might not somehow survive whether we throw them a life belt or not. That is incredible. Such irresponsibility is unbelievable!

But many of us spend our days philosophizing about that. "Maybe they will get to the shore without the truth that we know is real. Maybe we won't have to do it. Let's watch them and see if any of them can get to the shore without our help." Others of us rejoice that these are the end times and we will soon be in heaven.

The same Savior who bore Ayatollah Khomeini and his personality and the pain of its destruction in his own heart on Calvary, is the same Savior who bore the Shah's personality and his pride and greed

in his own heart and suffered the pain and the agony of his destruction on Calvary. He did it so that both of those men could live like God.

That Savior says to us, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? I will come in like manner as you saw me go. It is not for you to know the times or the seasons. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth."

That is what the Iranians need. They don't need preachers who witness. They don't need preachers who tell them there is a God who loves them and they can be like him and love him. They need preachers who ARE witnesses. That is what Jesus said – not, "Who will witness?" but, "You will be my witnesses." They need people who will live lives that have been transformed by Jesus' death, and been freed from what people think of them. They need people whose lives have been freed from dependence on money or good homes for their sense of security. They need to see people who live as if their Creator loves them, and whose Creator enables them to be like him.

They need to see it in flesh and blood. They need to see people who are witnesses and people who live as I've just described. People who are not scared when their neighbor criticizes them, people who do not become paranoid when somebody doesn't like them. People who do not shake in their shoes when the bank balance begins to go down. People who have received the real separation from the world that God has enabled us to experience in Jesus. The loved ones in Iran need to see that.

That is why on Thursday I will fly to London, and on Friday afternoon I will walk down Southampton Row in London. I happen to know what I will see. The streets are littered at this moment in London with garbage because of a strike. There are rats running in the streets of this city that was once regarded as a sophisticated center of western civilization.

I will walk past restaurants and stores that are closed. Some are closed because the people themselves are on strike. Many are closed because the railways and the transportation system are paralyzed and the country is almost at a standstill.

I will walk into a little restaurant that is run by ten of us. That little restaurant is open and it is a witness to the Londoners themselves that it is possible to live and to survive in the increasing social disorder that is engulfing our world. It is possible to live an ordinary life and to have power over the chaos around you, because there is a Creator who loves you and can give you the same ability as he has to live at peace and in victory.

Now loved ones, that is what the world needs. That is what the Iranians need. Now I want you to take me most seriously, because this is the natural conclusion. This means your immigration. I have been here in the United States for fifteen years. You would never have known me if I had done a little here for three years and left again. That convinces nobody. You could say, "The fellow can preach." But you wouldn't know what his life is like. It means your immigration.

Some of us are going to be called by God to stay here in America and run the theological school and the businesses, and some of us to keep on with our own jobs and to support the whole headquarters operation here. But loved ones, the rest of us are to be abroad. The rest of us are to commit ourselves now to being trained theologically in the Christian Corps Training School. We're to sign up for classes -- preparing ourselves so that we can be of some use when we get abroad. We're to allow our lives to be integrated so that faith and works are one in us -- so that our faith is

expressed in our lives, and our lives expressed in our faith.

Then we are to look out and pray for our "Macedonia" -- for the land to which God wants us to go and live, carrying out our family lives and our professional lives -- in a street in Tehran, or a suburb in Paris, or a town in Kenya, or in Sydney, Australia, or in Venezuela. Somewhere in this dear world there is a place where God wants you to live as a living witness that he loves us, and that we can be like him and can love him too.

What about our protestations? Where are they -- in the light of the situation you see? Sure, America needs saving. Sure, some of us have to stay here -- but seventy-five percent of us? That is what it is at the moment. Seventy-five percent of the Christians alive in God's world are here, serving six percent of the people that Jesus died for.

In other words, there are ninety-four percent of the people that he died for that have never heard about Jesus. There are two—and—a—half billion people who don't know that there is a Creator who loves them, and don't know that they can be like him and love him too. Where are all our protestations for our right to be angry, or our right to lose our temper -- and still be a child of God?

The Iranians and the other loved ones in the world have HAD IT with that so-called Christian. They have difficulty remembering the few Christ-like Christians they have seen. They don't need more like them. The agony they are suffering at the moment is because of people's anger and greed and pride. Loved ones, why do we protest that we have a right to be angry and greedy and proud and lose our temper and still be regarded as children of God? The world doesn't need people like that. The world is dying because of people like that.

What the world is dying for, is to see men and women who have identified themselves with Jesus in his death -- to what people think of them; to what circumstances can do to them; to what the possession or the lack of material things can do to their security. The world is dying to see men and women who have been changed, and who live relaxed, loving, trustful, peaceful lives in the midst of what will be an increasingly disastrous series of chaotic circumstances. God lays that upon all of us here this morning.

We don't need more missionaries. We don't need more preachers. We need people like ourselves living in ordinary houses, doing ordinary jobs, being children of a Creator who loves us and in addition has enabled us to be like him.

"But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" I don't think one of us can sit here and say, "That doesn't mean me." You don't need to be a theological expert -- you need to be a child of God who lives like Jesus. The world is dying for that.

Jesus looks upon us this morning to see of the travail of his soul. Only you can decide by your response whether he will be satisfied. I had my life in Ireland planned. Most of us have our lives planned. I was content to stay there. We are all the same. We all have responded the same way up to this moment. Loved ones, whom will God send? Who will go for him? How you answer that will determine your whole relationship with God from this day forward.

Let us pray. Dear Father, I would pray for my brothers and sisters, and especially for those of us

who feel we're just too tied down. We work at the bank, or we've built up a career in a corporation, and it's just too impossible to go live abroad for you. Lord, help us to see how short this life is, how few years there will be -- and how vital it is to spend them in something we know is eternally valuable. Lord, help us to think of the little ones in Iran -- the souls running around in confusion and chaos. Help us to see the little ones in China and in India who can never hear unless there be a preacher who lives like Jesus, living in their street. We ask you to help each one of us (me included) to be responsible in our reaction to what was presented here, for your glory. Amen.