

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Free speech or abuse?

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In the wake of the Jan. 8 shootings in Tucson, the Arizona state legislature has passed emergency legislation to prevent the Westboro Baptist Church from picketing victims' funerals, including that of 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green. The church's leader, Fred Phelps, has posted a video in which he thanks God for the Tucson gunman, calling Loughner a "soldier hero" for God. The law, based on one passed in Ohio in 2006, prohibits any group from protesting within 300 feet of a funeral. The ban applies one hour before the funeral, during the funeral, and for one hour after the funeral. Breaking it is punishable by fines and possible jail time.

With news of the law's passing, several Arizona radio stations offered the church airtime to discuss its members' views in exchange for not protesting the funerals. The church has accepted the offers. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has slammed the stations for giving the church airtime, saying that doing so is the equivalent of negotiating with terrorists, and that "Westboro is being incentivized by being provided with an outlet to broadcast their hate to thousands of others." Even talk-show host Mike Gallagher, whose show reaches an estimated 10 million listeners, says he doesn't like giving the church the satisfaction of getting time on the air.

Is Arizona in the right to pass such a law, or does it contradict the 1st Amendment protection of free speech and the right to religious freedom?

Is giving airtime to a group notorious for its hate and spite a good trade-off if it keeps the funerals free of protesters? Or is it unjustly rewarding their beliefs?

And are you worried that if a national law were passed banning such protests, it could set a precedent that would allow for more restrictions on religious activities?

I am saddened beyond tears that the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, under the leadership of Fred Phelps, have threatened to picket the funeral of young Christina Taylor Green, one of the victims of bullets fired by a Tucson gunman several weeks ago. The only motive that they have claimed for their announced protest is to express hate and vengeance against those whom "God hates," presumably because Christina's family is Catholic.

The thing that is most disturbing to me about their proposed actions is that they represent themselves as a Christian church. I don't believe that any Christians I know could possibly ignore Jesus' message of love, as though this little girl's family has not suffered enough. And how could a supposed man of God say that he was glad for the killings because the gunman was a "Soldier Hero" sent by God to punish the people of our country for their sins?

Further, there are the three radio stations that have given a Phelps spokesperson airtime to express the group's views if the church will forego its planned protests. The leaders at these stations say that they are trying to protect the families from greater harm. But it is difficult to understand how allowing the vitriolic speech of this

group to be heard by thousands of listeners could be considered a fair trade. In fact, they are being given an even larger platform for their dangerous message.

Thank goodness the Arizona Legislature has enacted a law that prohibits such actions near funerals and has levied heavy penalties on participants. Our First Amendment rights to free expression should not include toxic speech and actions virtually guaranteed to cause harm.

I can't help believing that my Christian colleagues and all people of faith and goodwill mourn with me for the terrible losses by those in Tucson whose lives have been touched by these senseless deaths. And I pray that love will prevail over hate in our lives and in our country.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills, La Crescenta

What about freedom of speech? While we do have freedom of speech in this country, we also are not permitted to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater. In my opinion, for the state of Arizona to pass a law restricting freedom of speech at funerals, that's okay. Just as one must not overstep his bounds in yelling "Fire," so must one not overstep his bounds and compound the grief of family members who have lost a loved one.

What about giving that hateful church with its hateful ideology a platform on local radio? I think it's a good idea so that thinking people who hear such hate can understand for themselves how very uncompassionate those so-called "Christians" are. If enough people hear those idiots speak, they will realize just how awful their ideology is.

Am I worried that a national law might set a bad precedent? Absolutely. We are all familiar with the phrase, "There oughta be a law," but in this case, there shouldn't be. It's possible to have too many laws. In the time of Jesus, the ultra-legalistic Pharisees tried to keep every single one of the more than 600 laws that had evolved at the time. But in doing so, they sometimes lacked common sense — and certainly compassion. What we don't need is another law. What we do need is more common sense and more compassion.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

Arizona is right to prohibit groups from protesting shooting victims' funerals. Fred Phelps and his followers can still express their views in public, but the families deserve to mourn their losses without the provocation of others. That's just common courtesy and common sense. Paul described the purpose of law (including God's law), that it "is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane" (1 Timothy 1:9). If people treated each other with love and respect, we wouldn't need the laws we have to protect us.

Bribing such groups with media exposure is a terrible idea. In effect, any time they had something to say, they could threaten to bully some poor family and then offer not to in exchange for airtime. It would give them an incentive to continue and increase their unkind behavior.

While I agree that Arizona's law is justified in this instance, it does raise some concerns about its impact on other public religious expression. For example, I believe we should have the right to protest abortion centers (without violence, of course) and to pray "in Jesus' name" at city-council invocations. I suppose these questions about legality underscore the basic problem with law – it doesn't really solve the problem. God knew the Law of Moses wasn't the ultimate solution for mankind, so he intended all along to establish a new, better covenant with mankind: "I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). This happens only when we receive Jesus Christ and are born again, being made new people in our hearts by the direct work of God. This "new self... in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Ephesians 4:24) and doesn't need to be restrained by law.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church, Burbank

The belief of the Westboro Baptist Church that God is punishing the U.S. for homosexuality by war deaths and other calamities is ludicrous. It is depressing that they show up at soldiers' funerals.

That all these soldiers' funerals continue is sadder.

Whether the Arizona and Ohio laws against Westboro would survive a constitutional challenge is another question. Those who work to protect the First Amendment pick and choose cases to pursue, and the "ick" factor, high in Phelps' case, of a potential defendant is always a consideration.

However much I disapprove of Westboro, nevertheless I believe that unpopular ideas expressed in controversial places deserve free-speech protection. More free speech is called for, not trying to silence ideas with which one disagrees.

Before Arizona's new law was passed, I was heartened to hear about a plan in Phoenix for numerous counter-protesters at Christina's funeral to all wear large angel wings to block the Westboro group from the view of funeral-goers. Big signs that say "God is love" or more inclusively, "We are love" is another thought. We needn't squelch their rights or be silent ourselves.

Surely a full airing of Phelps' views would diminish, not increase, support for him. Homophobia is in an irreversible decline in the U.S.

The latest American Community Survey from the Census Bureau revealed that child-rearing by stable, same-sex couples is on the rise everywhere. Even Phelps cannot have failed to notice that openly gay folks are common and accepted in mainstream America.

In fact, I believe that fact has given rise to his hatred. I see his crusade as a last, irrational gasp of opposition to full rights for gays in this country. Counter-protest, ignore or ban, it will go away on its own inevitably, if not as soon as we want.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

I will not write about the Westboro church. My mother taught me that the only way to handle bullies is to ignore them, not to lend a single ounce of energy or encouragement to them. And so they will get not a word of drama from me.

I call instead for a return to common decency. We should not have to legislate the minimal amount of civility it takes to allow families to grieve in peace and privacy.

We should automatically know better than to consider, for even a second, creating a circus disturbance at the funeral of a child, or at anyone's funeral — and that includes reporters sticking microphones in the faces of grieving family members, asking them how they feel. We should just know better, we should have been raised better, as a society.

Rather than passing law after individual law in reaction to each new breakdown of civility, let's work on restoring civility. Let's just go back to agreeing that we should be good people, working together in a good society, and let the day of the mean, stupid circus be done.

Maybe you know the Cherokee tale:

"One evening, an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside all people. He said, 'My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.

'One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.

'The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.'

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, 'Which wolf wins?'

The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed.'"

America, let's start feeding the good wolf again.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

It is really hard to read the hateful stuff that this "church" spews. I couldn't find the interviews on the radio, but I suppose it's just as well. I don't think I could listen for very long, even for the sake of research. I hope that most of Gallagher's 10 million listeners had the same reaction. The First Amendment may guarantee you free speech, but that doesn't mean anyone has to listen to your shrill rant.

As a United Methodist pastor, I honor and rely on the First Amendment. I am heir to a legacy of advocacy for peace and justice. As we understand the gospel, Jesus calls us to this work of making the world a place that God would like to live in. Those who came before me "agitated" against segregation and war, and for women's rights.

With other people of faith, I have peaceably assembled many times, and signed many a petition to the government — for peace, worker justice, health-care reform, marriage equality, and against U.S.-sponsored torture. These positions are not without controversy, to be sure, and would in some other countries be immediately suppressed. I value the openness of our country's public conversations.

Given that, and given how outraged I am that any "church" would spread hate in the name of Jesus, I recognize that I have not done enough as a faith leader to counter them. Paul admonished the church in Corinth for relying on secular courts to settle the grievances among believers (1 Corinthians 6). Rather than hoping that hate will become illegal, we should be presenting the loving face of faith. The Anti-Defamation League recommends not mounting a counter-protest, though the idea of encircling a grieving military family with a silent, caring, protective presence appeals to me. The ADL also notes that some organizations have run fundraisers that garner dollars for each minute the "church" stands in protest – also an awesome counter to hate.

Use free speech wisely. Listen carefully.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church