

Bible and First Amendment twisted by church and court

How can something so good become so twisted by both the Supreme Court of the United States and members of a Christian church?

The Supreme Court ruled March 2 in *Snyder vs. Phelps* that the First Amendment rights of Westboro Baptist Church to protest outweighed the right of a family to bury their son without a disgusting display of vitriol near the funeral.

Albert Snyder, father of 20-year-old Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, sued the Rev. Fred W. Phelps and members of his Kansas-based Westboro congregation, seeking financial compensation for emotional distress, defamation and other such injuries.

A Maryland federal district court ruled in favor of Snyder, but the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the ruling. The Supreme Court ruled 8-1 to uphold the Circuit Court ruling.

The lone dissenting Justice, Samuel Alito, disagreed with his colleagues that the Westboro protests were only public in nature. He noted that the church members could have chosen any number of venues to picket, any of which would not have involved the location of Matthew Snyder's funeral, or the implication that the soldier himself was homosexual (untrue) or destined for hell (a decision not in the purview of Rev. Phelps, as far as we know). Alito said that the WBC tactic of calling attention to its picket locations was designed to attract publicity for itself and inflict injury on the Snyder family.

"This strategy works because it is expected that respondents' verbal assaults will wound the family and friends of the deceased and because the media is irresistibly drawn to the sight of persons who are visibly in grief. The more outrageous the funeral protest, the more publicity the Westboro Baptist Church is able to obtain," Alito wrote. "Thus, when the church recently announced its intention to picket the funeral of a 9-year-old girl killed in the shooting spree in Tucson - proclaiming that

she was 'better off dead' – their announcement was national news, and the church was able to obtain free air time on the radio in exchange for canceling its protest."

The right to protest peaceably, and to express one's point of view, especially in a public place on a matter of public concern, is an important one. Many exercise this right when they gather, for example, in Annapolis annually at Lobby Night to tell state legislators about issues of concern to Catholics. Others exercise this right by marching for life in Washington or during the upcoming 40 Days for Life. And many exercise that right by gathering peacefully at abortion clinics to bring attention to the harm being done there and to attempt to dissuade women from aborting their children.

But in attacking a private funeral, Phelps and the Westboro group go too far. As much as we love the First Amendment and the freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and religion it affords, we do not understand how it allows WBC members to express opinions that are, as acknowledged in the court ruling, "so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community."

It seems that Rev. Phelps and his congregation, with their frequent protests – and consequent frequent litigation – are far more familiar with the Constitution of the United States than with the words of the Lord from Scripture:

A scholar of the law once asked Jesus: " 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself' " (Mt 22:36-39, cf. also Leviticus, Mark, Luke, Romans, et al.).

The Westboro congregation is full of hate. The Bible they're reading and the God they're following are not the same ones we know. Our God is a merciful God, whose divine mercy and love are available to all.

Perhaps there is one more sign the Westboro crowd needs to see – a quote from Psalm 95: "Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Do not harden your hearts."

Christopher Gunty is associate publisher/editor of The Catholic Review.