

“Spiritual and Religious?”

Acts 8:4-17

January, 13, 2013

I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious. I think that almost every one of us have heard or read that sentence at one time or another. Especially in recent memory. More and more people are now placing themselves in the category of SBNR. I know that I have encountered many people whom I have outright asked if they would like to come to church or if they would like to come and worship and the response that I often here is "Sorry, but I just don't believe in organized religion. I'm spiritual but I'm not religious."

It's one of the most common objections that we hear these days when we invite people to church. And I believe therefore that we as Christians, if we are serious about spreading the Good News of Jesus and grow the church need to consider this response. What are we to think and how well are we equipped to respond to the reply, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious?"

I personally believe that there are a number of reasons why people say this. Some suggest that with the phrase, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious" there is a presumption on behalf of the person saying it that religion has to do with doctrines, dogmas, and ritual practices, while spirituality has to do with the heart, feeling, and experience. The spiritual person is looking for an immediate and spontaneous experience of something they consider divine or as being of some higher power. She or he does not want to subscribe to beliefs established by existing religious traditions.

We see this kind of spirituality at work in the life of the Samaritans in this text that Sandra read for us this morning from the book of Acts. As a whole the Book of Acts has a lot to tell us about Spirituality and the work of the Holy Spirit. The book is basically an early history of the church, a continuation of the Book of Luke that explains how the promised Holy Spirit led and empowered the first apostles.

This morning the books of Acts takes us to the land of Samaria beyond Jerusalem and Judea where the apostles had been up to now. It is at a time when the apostles are being persecuted and Stephen had just been stoned to death...becoming the first martyr of the faith. As we encounter the Samaritans in this text this morning they are pre-Holy Spirit...but this

doesn't mean that they were in any way pre-spirituality. If we were to look back a couple of verses from this morning, we would read for example in verse 7 how when Philip first started engaging the Samaritans "that with shrieks, evil spirits came out of many."

And then, in this text which Sandra read for us we learn about this fellow named Simon. Simon was a man who was said to have practiced magic. Perhaps along the lines of Chriss Angel, or Doug Henning or David Copperfield. Maybe he made camels levitate or pulled birds out of people's ears...who knows?

But he was impressive enough that his nickname was "Power of God." He was a true first century entertainer and celebrity...a real showman. Simon was a man with spiritual power. He had the power to scintillate and titillate his audiences. As the text reads, Simon was a guy who amazed the people of Samaria...he gave them an experience.

I believe that when it comes to spirituality, most people are looking for or are referring to an experience. That's what draws a crowd these days, the opportunity to experience something by way of entertainment. Almost everything these days is judged in one way, shape, or form by its entertainment value. I've even seen it happen with worship. The whole point is to avoid boredom and to have one's boredom replaced with something exciting and entertaining. Remember the word boring comes from the word bore which literally means to drill a hole. Boredom is a state of emptiness...including spiritual emptiness...and oftentimes people will turn to any spirit available to have that emptiness filled. And at times the need to relieve this spiritual itch can end up being harmful and isolate us.

There was a study released this past week in the British Journal of Medicine that noted how those who claim to be spiritual but not religious are actually worse off than people who are spiritual and religious. The study interviewed those calling themselves spiritual, ones calling themselves religious and those who called themselves neither. The analysis led to one clear conclusion. "People who have a spiritual understanding of life in the absence of a religious framework are vulnerable to mental disorder which included dependence on drugs, abnormal eating attitudes, anxiety, phobias and neuroses."

The study is far from complete. And there are problems associated with asking people about "religion" because it can have such a narrow definition for some and a broad one for others. But there is evidence to suggest that the practice of spirituality alone is incomplete.

Spirituality can offer us an experience, yes, but often there is little else beyond the experience itself, especially if one sees spirituality as a solitary experience. Think about it, if you do not share your spiritual experiences with others, then there is no depth beyond yourself. The spiritual experience is one that remains shallow and detached. It lacks roots.

Lillian Daniels a Congregationalist Minister in Chicago uses the following metaphor to describe a lot of modern day designer spiritualities. She says that people build their spirituality in the way that they might pick a bouquet of flowers. They will pluck from here and there, from this garden and that pot, but before long the bouquet starts to wilt, it loses its fragrance, and before long the bouquet becomes brown and crusty and lifeless.

It's kind of ironic since I believe that at the heart of the distinction between religion and spirituality, for those who say they are "spiritual but not religious" lies the presumption that to think and act within an existing tradition—to practice religion—risks making one *less* spiritual...more dry and crusty. To be religious is to bow to the authority of another, to believe in doctrines determined for one in advance, to read ancient texts only as they are handed down through existing interpretative traditions, and blindly to perform formalized rituals. For the spiritual, religion is inert, arid, and dead.

I think that this is important for us as a church to recognize because I believe that those who claim to be spiritual, actually are searching for something in their lives. Some of the spirituality may be far out but it is often explored in earnest by ones who are seeking. And we as a church have to ask ourselves if we are equipped to respond. What can we offer?

Are we prepared to respond the way those first apostles in the book of Acts responded to the spirituality of the Samaritans? Philip and Peter and John were able to communicate that the Christian religion was anything but inert and anything but dead. The power of the Christian faith even amazed that fellow Simon the Great! In fact, so sincere were the first apostles in how they communicated the Christian message that they wanted people to experience a

deeper connection. The apostles wanted others to have that rootedness that they themselves had been given by their religious tradition.

It wasn't good enough that the Samaritans were baptized in the name of Christ, we see that they don't actually receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John make the journey to them all the way from Jerusalem and lay hands on them. Now don't ask me if they had their flu shots or if they had washed their hands or used sanitizer. But there was something that necessitated the actual physical contact between them and the Samaritans that was vital to receiving the authentic Holy Spirit of the Christian faith. There is connection and there is contact.

You see, in doing this, the first apostles wanted to make it clear and understood to the Samaritans that the Holy Spirit was not like any other spirit that they might have encountered. The Holy Spirit was not there to titillate and scintillate, or entertain and excite or offer some dazzle and dazzle. This was the Spirit of the Almighty God. The Spirit promised to them by Jesus, the one they received at Pentecost. It was the Holy Spirit that had the power change hearts and transform lives...it brings order out of chaos. By laying on hands, the apostles wanted to show that the Christian faith about being spiritual and religious. It was about being connected to the traditions of the faith. The Holy Spirit has a track record. It was something that could be traced through them. Spirituality coupled with religion is what provided the strength of faith.

This is not to say that experience has no place, indeed the book of Acts is one that describes experiences of the Holy Spirit, but we need to consider the religion because it gives us a framework to experience the authentic Spirit of Christ.

This is something of which old St. Benedict was well aware of about 1500 years ago. St. Benedict lived during a time of great uncertainty after the fall of Rome. He wanted to give young men a place of refuge. As the patron Saint of Students, Benedict wrote the first rule for monastic life. He described the monastery as a "school for the Lord's service" and "as a training ground for eternal life." Not unlike how we might consider the church. Benedict said that the battle to be waged is against the weaknesses of the body and of the spirit. Victory lies in love. For Benedict, through obedience, stability, poverty, and humility—and through the fear, dread, sorrow, and compunction that accompany them—the monk will "quickly arrive at that *perfect*

*love of God which casts out fear (1 John 4:18)."* The monks would no longer live out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, with good habit and delight in virtue."

Religious tradition coupled with the Holy Spirit, breaks the fear, it keeps us attached and gives us something to hold on to. Recently I read a story about a situation that arose near the end of the Second World War and afterwards in continental Europe. One of the major catastrophes of the war were the number of starving, orphaned children living in refugee camps. The children were often terrified and afraid to sleep at night. That was until someone was inspired to give all of the children a piece of bread that they could go to bed with. Suddenly the children started sleeping. They went to sleep clutching on to the bread knowing that not only had they eaten that day, but they had bread for tomorrow too.

My friends that's what it means to be spiritual AND religious. It the promise of being filled even when you don't know what tomorrow may bring. It's a promise because the Holy Spirit has a track record. We hold onto our traditions, our rituals, our practices and our beliefs because through them we know what to expect and know we will be fed. And the expectation of our religion is always that we will be fed by love...the love that people have feasted on for ages. It is the love that has fed us through every significant, transformative moment of our lives. It's the love that gets us through the day...and it's the same love that we hold onto at night when we say our prayers, knowing that it is the same love that will be there to feed us and help us to feed others in the morning that is to come both now and forever.