

Sermon 03 06 16 Religion
Scripture Matthew 4: 18-22
Sermon Title Not Religious but Spiritual

At our recent Annual Meeting, our Moderator Jamie Mitcheson, spoke of starting a discussion on church growth. Deacon Bill Driscoll quoted some statistics of people considering themselves spiritual but not religious. Jamie spoke of starting a focus group that might come up with ideas to grow our membership. I have told Jamie the obvious, that I want to serve in that group. Today, I would like to go out front on this issue. I'm hoping to help frame our conversation on this important topic.

Every clergyperson I know, myself included, has heard these words from someone who does not attend church: "I may not be religious in the conventional sense, but I am a very spiritual person." The implication is that personal path of heart and mind, is a purer, more authentic way of communicating with God, or nature, or the great unknown, or whatever- than the physical act of attending church, giving charity, or performing good deeds.

The best reply to that statement that I've on this heard is from a Los Angeles Rabbi named David Wolpe. Here is what he told the spiritual person, "No, spirituality is what you feel, theology is what you believe, religion is what you do."

The most sublime religious faith comes real only when it is translated into behavior. It is when you are inspired to do things you might not otherwise do as an enactment of your religious faith.

After the Annual Meeting discussion, Meg purchased and is reading a delightful book by a Congregational minister named Rev. Lillian Daniel. The book is entitled, *When Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough*. (2013) Early in the book she describes a spiritual seeker who had tried one flavor of Christian worship after another and found cause to reject them all. Now, he told her, he spends Sunday mornings reading *The New York Times* and gets more spiritual substance from that than most church services.

Then, he puts on his running shoes and goes for a run in nature. He said, "I'm one with the great outdoors. I find God there. And I realize I am deeply spiritual but no longer religious. Rev. Daniel comments, "Like people who attend church wouldn't know that... But push a little harder, on this self-developed religion, and you don't get much... depth." Because "most self-developed Sunday-morning ritual has little room for sin." For an awareness of the wrongness of some things. It lacks a framework for understanding and responding to days, and lives, that are not full of sunshine and butterflies.

This same disenchanted church abstainer tells her of how proud he is of his school-age son who wrote a report about children in

faraway places whose lives are darkened by violence and hunger. The boy concluded, "It made me realize that we're so lucky to be living here and not there." The father bragged that his son really gets it. "That's what our religion is: gratitude" he said. Lillian Daniels responded in her book, "when you witness pain and declare yourself lucky, you have fallen way short of what Jesus would have you do... I think God wants us to witness pain and suffering and, rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to feel angry and want to do something about it."

Her point, one among many, is that people who invoke simplistic reasons for rejecting traditional religion but find God in spring flowers and changing leaves have no problems as long as it is sunny out, but they will have no framework for making sense of a hurricane, or for that matter, a business reversal, or a diagnosis of a serious illness.

At times like that, you need a tradition that has seen it all and has no illusions about the world. You need a community, people who have learned to find God in the shadows as well as the sunshine, to find God in the courage of afflicted people and the helpfulness of their neighbors. You need a people whose faith compels them not to pity you or to question God on your behalf, but to hold you and help you dry your tears.

I have a friend who grew up around here. She is now married with a child and living in Nashville, TN. She has had major back surgery

and has not been able to do her normal duties like cooking and carting around her daughter. Her neighbors, and she is new to the neighborhood, have been cooking for her and getting young Jennifer to where she needs to go. Yvette said to me, “The people in the south are so much nicer than the people up north, who would never do that for neighbors.” I pushed back and said, “That may be true of some people up north, but I can tell you that it is not true of church people. The people in my church are constantly bringing food to those in need and driving folks who need rides hither and yawn. They send cards to folks who fall ill and pray for each other. I’ll bet you that all your neighbors that are helping you are church people. Do me a favor and ask.” She did. I love to say, ‘I told you so.’ We are talking about religion being what you do, not what you believe.

Those of you of a certain age will remember the 1976 presidential election (oh, how I long for those gentile days), between the incumbent, Gerald Ford and the Democratic challenger, Governor Jimmy Carter. Carter, in his Sunday school teacher piety, said that he was a sinner because he had lusted in his heart for some of the attractive women on the campaign trail. I think someone should have told him that the sin is not in the thinking, but in the doing. He did not act on the thought. Religion is not about what you feel, or think, or believe. Religion is about what you do.

A reader once wrote to advice columnist Ann Landers, “My husband is sixty-five years old, but he keeps staring at every attractive young woman on the street. How can I make him stop?” Landers replied, “Don’t worry about it. My dog chases busses, but wouldn’t know what to do with it if he ever caught one.”

My nephew Joe is one of my favorite people and I stand in awe of who he has become and what he is accomplishing in his life. A few years ago, he encouraged a friend of his who was in a faith crisis to call me. One of things he said to his friend is that I’m the best theologian he knows. His friend never called, but the next time Joe and I spoke I corrected him. I told him that I am not a theologian. Theologians write books and are seminary professors. Unlike me, theologians can keep strait the difference between ontological and epistemological proof of God.

I’m a pastor. Sure, I think theologically sometimes. But my theology is less about who God is or what God is, and more about who we are and what we do because of what God means to us. I’m about trying to help people best live their lives, which is to follow the teachings of Jesus. The message is simple. Love is better than hate, compassion is better than indifference, forgiveness is better than resentment, and kindness is better than cruelty. People come to

church to be reminded of those things because in this harsh world they are easy to forget.

Linguists say that the word “religion” is related to the word “ligament” from the Latin ligare, which means “to connect.” One might argue that the word refers to beliefs that connect a person to God. But I’m inclined to say that the role of religion is to bind us to other people in order to evoke together the sense of God in our midst.

We don’t go to church to find God; God might be more assessable in a beautiful nature scene. We go to church to find other worshippers who are looking for what we are looking for, and together we find it. We become something greater than our solitary selves. The mark of an effective church is not how many people go there but how people live their lives differently for having been there. Said a little differently: Coming to church does not make you a Christian; it is what you do when you leave church that makes you a Christian.

One of the first pieces of advice I give to people going through a hard time- be it death, a divorce, loss of a job, whatever shape the misfortune may take is, “Please, don’t try to handle this alone. I know you are a New Englander and think you can handle this alone. This is a particular problem with men. They feel that accepting help is an admission of weakness or incompetence. But times like this is precisely when you need people with you. I did a healing service a few weeks

ago. People were going to their normal seats in the church. I asked them to sit close to each other because we don't heal in isolation, we heal together.

I remember going through a particularly rough patch that I was handling poorly. A buddy bought me a pair of running shoes, which turned me around. Thank God he was there for me. Neil is still one of my best friends and always will be. The need for help from others in time of grief is the reason I brought Stephan Ministries to Union Church.

Belief exists inside a person. As such, it has the power and the tendency to separate a person from others who might believe differently. But authentic religion connects people rather than separates them. The primary function of religion, as every clergyperson worth their salt knows, is to bring people together rather than to separate them, thereby increasing their joy and diluting their sorrows. For that to happen, one's theology has to escape from the prison of the self and translate into the sacred deeds shared with others, deeds sanctified by having God's fingerprints all over them.

So when you start talking to your 'spiritual but not religious' friends about checking us out, might I suggest a few things. They don't have to have a certain set of beliefs to be part of us. They will find a group of people who are connected to each other in special and dare I say beautiful ways. They will find a food pantry here that can always

use an extra set of hands. They will find folks bringing meals to Main Spring Homeless Shelter. They will find people helping each other in times of need. They will find Stephan Ministries, which exists to walk with them through their grief. They will find people who will be there for them when, not if, tragedy hits. They will find young people connecting with each other in their own ways and having fun doing God's work. They will find Sunday school and a crib room for the young ones. They will find worship in which laughter and tears are common. They will find great choirs if music is their thing. They will hear good words that just might help them live more deeply, fully, and lovingly. They will feel the Spirit move, not just in a beautiful nature scene, but in ways that they will not fully understand, but will take their breath away. They will find God in ways they never thought imaginable. We are Union Congregational Church. And the people of God say... AMEN