

## “Can You Be Too Spiritual?”

Date: April 19, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 24:36-45

Occasion: Eater 3, Year B

Theme: biblical interpretation; Gnostics, dualism

When we read the Bible, it's important to remember that it was written in the midst of real life. Many people think the Bible was written in a vacuum, totally unrelated to anything going on in the real world. A bunch of men sat down one day and started taking dictation from God. But it didn't happen that way.

The Bible was written by real people facing the very real circumstances of their own time. We never want to deny the role of the Holy Spirit who inspired those authors, but we also need to understand the context of when they were writing.

In the text for today we bump up into one of those situations that happened in the early church which caused Luke to include this particular vignette from the life of Jesus. You see, there were in those times people who were trying to out-spiritualize everyone else.

Paul had trouble with them later, in Corinth. And it is clear that Luke had trouble with them too. They were known as the Gnostics. Gnostics believed that everything material was evil; only those things which were spiritual were good.

Material possessions, food, sexuality, anything that had to do with the body was considered evil. Why? - merely because it was material in nature, and not spiritual. Only spiritual things were considered good.

And so the Gnostics tried to make Jesus into a purely spiritual being. They said he never really existed as a flesh and blood person.

He didn't have a real body; he only seemed real. If Jesus was truly the Savior of the world, according to the Gnostics, then Jesus could not have a body like you and I do.

Why would they say that? Because if he were like you and me, with bodies of flesh, that would be considered evil. Only if he were a spirit, a ghost-like apparition, could he be truly good. Jesus could only exist in the spirit, not in the flesh, to be considered holy.

Now we get to the part that has to do with Easter. When Luke tells his version of the resurrection story, he wants to make sure that everybody knows, that Jesus who lived and died and rose again, he was a real, flesh and blood human being, just like you and me.

Jesus tells his disciples to look at his hands and feet, to see where he was nailed to the cross. He told them to handle his body, to examine for themselves his bones and his flesh. Luke, the Gospel writer, wants to make sure that nobody misunderstands. Jesus whom we worship, is a real person, not a ghost.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus even goes so far as to ask the disciples for a piece of broiled fish so that he might eat it, to prove to them that he was no ghost.

In effect, Jesus says, "You don't need to call the Ghost Busters; I'm no ghost. It's really me, in the flesh. Touch me and see for yourselves. Watch me eat and you'll see I'm no mirage. Touch, see and believe!"

But what do the Gnostics have to do with you and me? Does the Gnostic heresy still live today? I believe it's still around. Even if it not a total world view, it corrupts the way many Christian people think and believe. And that is the meaning of a heresy:

Not that a person believes totally wrong, but their understanding is distorted, putting too much emphasis on certain doctrines, leaning too far in a certain direction, pulling them away from the orthodox view.

Can you be too spiritual? I think that's the heresy of the Gnostics, and it's still around today. Let me tell you where I see it creep into our thoughts and beliefs.

Many Christians today continue to think in the dualistic fashion of the Gnostics. For example, many Christians think this world is totally corrupt and it's only when we get to Heaven, in the realm of the spiritual, that things will be truly good.

Those who become too spiritual look for the end of the world as the only way that the problems of society will ever be solved. They retreat into the private world of what I call the "me and Jesus syndrome."

They say or think something like this: "As long as I have Jesus in my life, I really don't care what happens to the world. I'm just biding my time until Jesus comes back, or calls me home."

Yes, we can be too spiritual, when our so-called faith blinds us to the very real needs of human beings who are hurting and suffering. You can be too spiritual when you neglect the needs of the homeless, the hungry, those living in poverty, refugees fleeing for their lives from the horrors of war.

Yes, we can be too spiritual when we only pray for heaven to come and we ignore the very real needs of people on earth now. The Christian faith does not take us out of the world, but brings us back into the hurting world.

True spirituality looks for the coming reign of God, and finds it when the poor are fed, the oppressed are set free, the lame can walk and the blind can see. God's kingdom, said Jesus, is here and now. God's kingdom is not found in the "bye and bye."

Another way that Christians can be too spiritual is by saying that anything having to do with pleasure is a sin. Eating a good meal, enjoying good music, enjoying a back rub or even the sensuality of the good gift of sex - all these are pleasures that God has given us to enjoy, in moderation and within the bounds that God has given us.

Somehow we have come to believe that the desires of our body and the desires of the soul are in competition with each other. We have become alienated from ourselves and feel guilty for things that we don't have to feel guilty for.

This confusion and guilt that we feel is a result of the body-spirit dualism perpetuated by the Gnostics. According to them, you have to deny that part of yourself in order to rise to the higher plane of salvation.

But in ancient Judaism there was no body-mind or body-spirit split. Human beings were understood to be a unity of body and mind. We are our body; we are our mind. Not merely one or the other, but both. Jesus Christ did not put us at war with ourselves.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus came to restore that unity that was there in the beginning, when God first made us, before the Fall, before sin ruined everything.

Can we be too spiritual? Yes, if we believe that the body and the spirit are enemies. But they are not. In Jesus Christ we are a unity

of body, mind and spirit. Sexuality and sensuality are not cursed but blessed. Feelings are not enemies, but friends.

We can be too spiritual when our religion takes us out of the world and causes us to lose compassion for our brothers and sisters who share the planet with us. As Christ was made known in the eating of ordinary food, we discover the holy when we share our food with those in need.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, no mere ghost, but real flesh and bones. Jesus cares about our very real, physical needs. He is the bread of life. Take, eat, and be satisfied. Amen.