

Spiritual and Religious
Acts 10:1 – 23a, 23b – 29, 34 – 48
Sunday, October 13, 2019

A little while back, I was meeting with a couple that wanted to get married. They weren't members of the church, hadn't grown up here, and one of the things I always do in situations like that is try to get a sense of their faith background; where they're coming from, so I know where to meet them. I asked the bride-to-be, and she told me how she had grown up in a Presbyterian church in the town where she was raised, and then went off to college and got a job, but hadn't been able to find a church she liked where she was living now. I asked the groom, and he told me how he grew up Catholic, but there was a lot that he didn't like about that. There were aspects of Catholicism that he really struggled with. So he had left the Catholic Church and hadn't really tried to find anything else. He said, "I still *believe* in God, and I *pray* every day. I'm really *spiritual*, but I'm just not *religious*."

This is something that we hear a lot these days. People describing themselves as "spiritual but not religious." I know that some of you even have kids or grandkids who fit that description. They *believe* in God, they have *faith*, maybe they even *pray* and take part in some kind of service activities (working in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter or Habitat for Humanity), but they don't feel the *need* or *desire* to participate in any kind of church or organized religion. I've had people say to me, "I go out for a hike or somewhere out in nature, and *that's* where I feel close to God. *That's* my church." But there's something about *institutional religion* that turns them off. Maybe they've had a bad experience in a church. Maybe it's just *boring* to them; doesn't meet them where they are or have any relevance to their life. Whatever the case, we've been hearing that more and more in recent years – people who want the *spiritual*, the connection with God, they just don't want anything to do with organized religion. There was a book that came out in 2007 that sums it up; author Dan Kimball titled it, *They Like Jesus, but Not the Church*.

Now, it's easy to *dismiss* that or even *ridicule* it, as I have heard people do before. They point to it as a sign of an *immature* or *self-centered* faith. That it's all about *me* and what *I* want, and that I can pick and choose the aspects of faith that works for me. Or they say, "Spirituality...what even *is* that? Some vague, generic notion of faith." But I think we *have* to start by *taking seriously* the concerns and criticisms raised by those expressing a desire for spirituality and a disdain for organized religion. Because the first thing that they are expressing is a *desire for spirituality*; a desire for connection with God. They *realize* that there is something greater at work in the world around them, and they want to be a *part* of that. And while they may not be pursuing it on the same path that *we* are, any time we see people expressing that desire for connection with the divine, it should be taken seriously and *celebrated*.

But the *second* thing that they are expressing is that there is something that's not quite right with the church. And *that* tends to be where we stop listening or dismiss them; when it feels like they are criticizing *us* or the church that we *love*. But maybe they see the abuse that has taken place – physical, sexual, or spiritual abuse that has hurt so many people (maybe even hurt *them*). Maybe they say, "All churches care about is *money*." Maybe they've experienced *judgment* in the church when they needed *grace*. Maybe they see us constantly *fighting* and *splitting* over theology or interpretations of scripture or politics or just the silly stuff that we get upset about sometimes, and they say, "They can't even get along with *each other*. Why would I want to be a part of *that*?"

And if we're being *honest*, we have to acknowledge that there is *validity* in those complaints. There are *plenty* of times when we fail to be the church that Christ created and calls us to be. Gandhi said it *decades* ago, "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. They are so

unlike your Christ.” And that’s harsh, but there *is* truth in that. We confess that every single Sunday, don’t we? We confess the ways that we are not like Christ; the ways that we fall short of the glory of God. And if we *listen to* and *take seriously* the complaints and criticisms or just *wounds* of those who express a desire to be spiritual but not religious, can’t that help us to become *more* like Christ? To look in the mirror and say, “Yeah, there are some things that we need to change, because it’s obviously *hurting* people.”

And here’s the thing. We dismiss them for being spiritual but not religious, while at the same time, they see us as being *religious* but not *spiritual*. I was at a play the other night, and the two main characters were talking about this very thing. One of them said, “I do believe in a higher power. But I also think organized religions have become so overlaid with extraneous matter that their actual spiritual substance has become almost completely obscured.” That we get so focused on the organized, institutional stuff – all the rules and traditions and practices – but there’s no *life* in them. There’s no real connection with God. It’s just empty ritual and routine.

The *point*, I would argue, is not to be spiritual *or* religious. Because neither one on their own works. They each just reflect a deeper longing for connection with God. But in order to *find* that connection, you need them *both*. You need the *spirit* and you need the *structure*. You need the *freedom* and you need the *tradition*.

The words for *spirit* in scripture are the Hebrew word *ruach* in the Old Testament and the Greek word *pneuma* in the New Testament. They both mean *spirit*, but they also mean *breath*. All throughout scripture, God’s Spirit is related to *wind* or *breath*. Jesus *breathes* on his disciples and it says they receive the Holy Spirit. So *spirit* is *breath*. And in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters, the *church* is compared to a *body*. The *Body of Christ*. If the Spirit is

breath, and the church (or religion) is a body, you can't have one without the other. A body without breath is just a corpse; it's *dead*. And *breath* without a *body* – *spirit* without a *body* – what do we say *that* is? That's a ghost. It's *alive*, but *not really*. Life is found in the union of breath and body. You need *both* in order to *live*. The *Spirit* needs a *body*, and the *Body* needs a *Spirit*. We can't just be spiritual *or* religious. *Life* – *real* life, *abundant* life – is found in the *union* between the two.

We actually see this in this story of Peter and Cornelius from Acts. The story starts with Cornelius, who was a Roman soldier. He was not Jewish *but*, it says, he was a devout man who feared God, gave alms generously, and prayed constantly to God. Now, when it says he “feared God,” that doesn't just mean he was *afraid* of God. This is a specific Greek phrase that has a specific meaning. The words used to describe him are *phoboumeno ton Theon*. This was a name (God-fearers) that was given to non-Jewish people who *worshipped* the God of Israel and engaged in *some* Jewish religious practices, but had not fully adopted the Jewish religion. They were Gentiles who were *interested* in God and impressed by Jewish monotheism and ethics, and they *sometimes* attended the synagogue, but they were not circumcised, and they did not keep Jewish food laws.¹ They were like the first “spiritual but not religious.” They like your *Yahweh*, but they don't like your *laws* (all the institutional stuff that comes *with* it).

Peter, on the other hand, was *deeply* Jewish. He knew Jewish scripture and law and he *kept* it. We hear stories throughout Acts of how he is in the synagogue worshipping. He is keeping Jewish food laws. He was a disciple of Jesus, who he saw as the promised Messiah of Israel. He did everything a good, faithful Jewish person should do. In fact, when we first see him in this story, it says, “About Noon the next day...Peter went up on the roof to pray.” This wasn't just

¹ M. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, pg. 401.

that he decided to go pray while he waited to lunch. Peter was engaging in the ancient practice of praying the hours. At set times each day – 6 AM, 9 AM, Noon, 3 PM, 6 PM – you would say certain prayers. Not just *any* prayers you wanted to say. It was very structured. Peter was *immersed* in this structure. He had received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, so he was *spiritual*, *spirit-filled*. But he was also very *religious*, deeply engrained in the traditions and practices and institutional structure of the Jewish faith.

And what we find out was that Cornelius was *also* praying the hours. He tells Peter, “Four days ago, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when I had a vision.” So he was *praying* at the appointed time. It was in this structured practice of faith that they each have an experience of the presence of God that results in them coming together. The more they talk and listen to each other, it says the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and those who were with him, and they were baptized. They were filled with the Spirit and then entered fully into the Body of Christ, the structure of the Christian faith. They became *spiritual and religious*.

There is *so much* that we could unpack from this story, but I want to focus on two small things. Peter and Cornelius both have a direct experience of the presence of God. They both have a vision in which the Divine presence appears to them and directs them. It’s what is referred to as a *mystical* experience. That term *mystical* sounds very new-agey and strange to us Presbyterians, but all it means is a direct experience of the presence of God. Someone who is a *mystic* is someone who has had a direct encounter with God and their life and faith flows from that encounter. The German priest and theologian Karl Rahner said that “The Christian of the future will be a mystic...or nothing at all.” What he meant was that people will either have a dynamic, immediate, and experiential relationship with God, or they will be bereft of faith. That for Christianity to continue on into the future, for it to *survive* and *thrive*, depends on Christians

having a *direct experience of the presence of God*; an encounter with the Divine from which everything else in your life and faith flows forth. And if we *don't* have that, then our faith will cease to exist.

So Peter and Cornelius both had this mystical, direct experience of the presence of God. That's first. And the *second* thing is that those mystical experiences *occurred* within the structure of specific religious practices. It didn't just happen out of nowhere. They were engaged in a structured practice of prayer that was a part of a specific religious tradition. What we see throughout scripture – from the time of Moses on – is that people experience the presence of God when they are connected to and immersed in a faith tradition and its practices. And so for *us* to have a mystical encounter and experience of the presence of God, *we* need to be connected to a faith tradition and engaged in specific, regular religious practices. That's not to say it's the *only* way you can have an experience of the presence of God, or that you'll have one *every time* you engage in these religious practices. But it is through the structured practices of a faith tradition, it is through the *religious* that we open ourselves up to the *spiritual*.

I've shared with you before the story of how, when I was 16 years old, I was arrested for a crime that I did not commit. (I was *stupid*, but I didn't do the thing that I was accused of.) I was taken out of school in handcuffs, fingerprinted and photographed, had to go before a judge and spent months in the legal process. In that time I saw my whole life falling apart. All of the plans that I had made, all of my hopes for the future, this thing was just destroying it all.

One night, as I was going to bed, I was saying my prayers like I did every night. And as a part of my prayers, I was reading a psalm. It was Psalm 4, which at the end says, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." And as I *read* those words and

prayed those words, I had this *overwhelming sense* that God was *with me*. Not just that God loved me or cared about me or was thinking about me, but that God was *actually, physically* present with me; right there in that room with me. I had never experienced anything like it before. God was *real* and God was *there*, as real and present as you and I are to each other right now. That's the best I can explain it to you, because it really defies description. I can't even tell you how long it lasted, but I had this sense that, whatever happened, whatever was coming in the future, I was not alone, and it was going to be okay. I didn't know *how* or *when*, but I had *peace*. The kind of peace that only the presence of God can give. And you can try to rationalize that and find any way you want to *explain* that experience so that it makes sense, but I have lived with it for 24 years, and I know what happened to me.

And I also know that the reason I was *able* to have that mystical, spiritual experience was because I was immersed in the structure and practices of a religious tradition. I had grown up in the church. I had at least some basic language of faith. I prayed regularly. I worshipped regularly. I was reading scripture. I wasn't just out there on my own trying to figure this out. There was a structure of faith in my life. And within that structure, there were *practices* that opened me up to such an experience. I was *religious*, and because of that I was also able to become *spiritual*.

If *we* are to be the Christians of the future, then *we* need to put ourselves in the position to have a mystical experience of the presence of God. As I've said over the past couple of weeks, not just to know *about* God (the religious), but to *know* God (the spiritual). Author Guy Sayles writes, "We don't simply decide, of course, that we will become mystics. Instead, we learn to spend time in shared worship and solitary silence; to listen; to open our eyes and hearts to the wonders of creation; to pay attention to our feelings, longings, fears and hopes; to share our lives with

those who need our love and whose love we need; to surrender to, rather than attempt to conquer, mystery; and to expect the embrace of the sacred Spirit. These practices open us to awareness of the God who is always present with us.”²

We open ourselves up to experiencing the presence of God by participating in regular, structured religious practices – prayer, worship, reading scripture, the sacraments, serving the poor, sharing meals together, participating in the life of a faith community. It is through the framework of the *religious* that we can truly experience the freedom of the *spiritual*. Open yourself up to the spiritual *and* the religious, so that you can encounter and experience God in *both*, and your faith can *live*.

² <https://ethicsdaily.com/why-future-christians-will-be-mystics-cms-19254/>