

“Spiritual But Not Religious”

Luke 18: 9-14 and Hebrews 10:19-25

Rev. Dean Snyder

I guess my only excuse, and it is not much of one, is that I was cranky. The church where I was pastor at the time was going through a period of stress and strain. Members of the church were unhappy with me and I guess I need to admit that I was unhappy with some of them.

The church was growing; new people were coming to worship and joining the church and some of the older members of the church had become convinced that I cared more about the new members than I did about them who had sacrificed to keep the church going for so many years. They were not happy when some newcomer came and sat in the pew where they had sat for the last 20 years.

I was impatient with them for not being more hospitable to the new people. It was one of those tense times that can happen between a pastor and a congregation during a time of change.

Nonetheless, I did something that is pastorally unforgivable. I complained about my people in public. This is how it happened: The AA group that met in our building was having its annual anniversary celebration. They have invited me to come and to say the invocation.

When I was introduced, the woman who introduced me, said as part of her introduction, “Pastor, you won’t find us in church very often. We are spiritual, but we are not very religious.” When I got up to say the prayer, I said, “It is refreshing to be with people who are spiritual, but not very religious because it seems as though I am spending most of my time lately with people who are religious but not very spiritual.”

I should not have said it and I repent, but still ... it is true that one of the grave dangers of church, of institutional religion, is that we will become religious without being very spiritual.

It is possible for us to use our religion defensively ... to use our religion as a defense mechanism against a true encounter with the holy. It is possible to use our religion to keep God in a building somewhere that we visit from time to time. Or keep God in a little wafer and a shot glass of wine.

To be spiritual means (this is my definition) that we become vulnerable enough to allow God mess with us, to disturb us, to challenge us, to upset us, to push us to grow and to change in our relationship with God, in our relationship to our own inner self and in our relationship with others.

But it is possible for us to use our structured religious experience to feel religious without allowing God to really get at us and to mess with us. This was the point of Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee came to church and sat down and said, "Thank God I am a good person. Thank God I am not like crooks and robbers, and addicts and other people like that. Thank God that I am not like that tax collector over there. Thank God I am a good person." And then went home from worship without having allowed God to mess with him.

Then there was the tax collector. In the time that Jesus was telling this story, tax collectors were people looked down upon by others. Tax collectors were considered to be cheats and crooks. The Roman government hired somebody to be its tax collector. The tax collector got all of the money out of the people that he could and then sent a percentage of it to Rome. The more money he could get out of people the more money he could keep for himself. It was considered a tacky and unsavory profession. People looked down on tax collectors.

In church the tax collector, Jesus said, sat in his pew his head in his hands, weeping saying, "God, forgive me for I am a sinner." Jesus' point is that the Pharisee who came to church to congratulate himself for being a good person, better than others, went home with nothing spiritual having happened in his life. He went home from church the way he had come, but the tax collector that everybody looked down on had had a true encounter with the holy. He went home with something having been agitated inside of his inner being.

I am so glad that I am a sinner. I am so glad that I do not have it all together. I am so glad that I could not pass myself off as a person without problems who has it altogether even if I wanted to. We are really quite fortunate, we who are sinners, we who have had problems in our lives and who have not always met the standards of success and conventional righteousness in our society. We are lucky because we cannot fool ourselves. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are better than everybody else, those of us who have had problems and dysfunctions and addictions and divorces and failures in our lives. We are very fortunate because we come before God as people who cannot pretend. We come as people who can let the spirit of God mess with us and do something in our lives.

How do we keep from becoming religious without becoming spiritual? The Book of Hebrews talks about that. The Book of Hebrews says that to avoid becoming religious without being spiritual we need other people in our lives who will provoke us. Again, how fortunate those of us are who have other people in our lives who provoke us. The Book of Hebrews says, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works. Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." (Hebrews 10: 24-5)

All of us need people in our lives who provoke us to love and good deeds ... people who will keep us from becoming complacent about our spiritual and emotional and personal lives

I believe in this. I have a group of people that I meet with weekly, many of whom are in the so-called "helping professions." We come together and we provoke each other. We encourage each another to continue growing, to not just go through the motions of doing our work, but to grow emotionally and spiritually in our own lives so that we can remain fresh at helping others. All of us need a group of people who will provoke and encourage us in our spiritual life to keep us from becoming merely religious.

Twelve years ago Foundry had 26 neighborhood Bible studies. All throughout the District, and Virginia and Maryland, all throughout the region, people would come together on a regular basis. They would study scripture together. They would share their lives together and they would encourage one another. Now we are down to maybe one or two neighborhood Bible studies. One of the things that I am blatantly promoting is new small groups that will give each of us an opportunity to be part of a community of people who will provoke and encourage us.

We already have many groups within the church who do this. The choir comes together and provokes each other to praise God more powerfully in music and to live their lives together in the spirit of Christ. They pray together and share their needs with one another.

Many of our mission groups come together and provoke and encourage each other, study groups and Disciple Bible studies do the same. But I want all Foundry folk to have the opportunity to be part of a group in their community who will gather together to provoke each other to love and to good works and to encourage each other.

So I have asked Ann Ledyard, who has been working with Debra Whitten over the past year to begin a new small group ministry at Foundry Church called Christ Care if she would preach a few minutes of the sermon this morning about Christ Care groups as a way of us coming together to support and encourage one another in love.

ANN LEDYARD: A little over 20 years ago I came to Foundry and I sat right over there, about the 5th row. I don't know whose pew I was in, but people were very friendly to me. Over the months and maybe a year when I sat there I got involved in a very small community. I think it is kind of intimidating sometimes to come into a big church not knowing anybody. And sometimes it takes awhile to get your feet under you and get involved.

My first community over there and I want to tell you that Henry Pilgrim and his wife Brenda were among the people who reached out to me, greeted me, got to know me. That was really important and a great way to begin.

I bet some of you may be new here and may be feeling the way I felt then. I encourage you to get involved when you can. Little by little I did become more and more invested in the life of the church and I did this several different ways. The first was adult forum where I got to be taught by wonder people like Adele Hutchins and Annie Belle Daisy. And through mission work like Bread for the City and through the neighborhood Bible study. And I see the Telkins who for many, many years have led this wonderful group that is on going every year, always welcoming of new people. And also through retreats. One of my earliest, most wonderful memories was going on healing ministry retreats which were often organized by Audrey and Walt Shropshire. I got to know a core group of people who got to be very important to my spiritual journey. And ofcourse, how could I forget the Women's Retreat? We are in our 10th year. I look out in the audience and see so many women that I have gotten to know through this s event. Most recently I have a wonderful experience in a Disciple I group that was led by Beth Norcross.

Every time I have joined a group I have gotten to know new people. That has been the thing that has

enriched my life. And as Dean said people who provoke you, people who challenge you, people who invite you to think about things in different ways so it has been a remarkable experience for me.

Back in March when Dean called and asked if I would be on the leadership team for Christ Care Group Ministry, I thought back on my many years here and I knew that I wanted to be trained for this new endeavor. Debra Whitten and I went for a week to St. Louis to be trained. We came back and we are looking for a few more good men and women who are willing to be in the leadership part of this. People who are willing to get trained initially so that we can then start up small groups here. So if you are interested, we would love to see you.

In the mean time, more immediately, we are offering a spiritual gifts class that is going to start later this month. You will be able to read about it in the Focus. Debra is going to be teaching four Tuesday nights. We will provide you with a meal at 6:30 pm and then from 7:00pm until 9:15 pm we are going to be offering you a chance to get in touch with your spiritual gifts. What are the gifts that you can bring to this wonderful body of believers? This is the opportunity for people to come and get fed that way, to do two things at one time. Number one to experience a small group and secondly to find out what our gifts are and how we can share them.

From my small community that started right over there on row 5, I've come to know many communities here at Foundry. We are a large community and yet we are a small community we as well. Each one has been a blessing in my life and each one has challenged me to grow. I would like to invite you and encourage you, to prod you to belong to, to consider, to challenge you to find a group to belong to. And to consider being on our leadership team for Christ Care.

Christ Care is a group where you are known, it is small, and you are known there. It is a group that prays together, prays for each other and prays for the world. It is a group that studies together, studies scripture through books and it is a group that is involved in missional service. All of these are things that are going to bless your life.

I encourage you to join us in this great venture and particularly people who might be interested in getting in on the leadership part, Debra and I will be happy to talk to you.

Thank you, Ann. If you are feeling in your life that you need a way and a place to be provoked and encouraged, please talk to Ann and Deborah.

I want to share one more thought this morning. If there is, as the Gospel suggest, the danger that we might become religious without becoming spiritual there is also the danger that we might be spiritual without being religious. What I mean is this: our spiritual experience needs to come together in institutions that will affect the world around us. Our spiritual experience needs to take into council meetings where we discuss and wrestle with ideas and motions. It needs to take us into experiences in the larger church where we discuss and debate and pray together, to understand what we are to be as an institutional church.

If we can be religious without being spiritual our spirituality can also slice through the world without making an impact unless we are part of those religious institutions which carry the faith and make it real in the world. We are called to the hard wrestle that happens in the church affecting the faith that we have inherited so that we pass on a more mature faith for those who come after us. It is often hard work and difficult work.

The Methodist Church in the 1800s debated for 50 years before it came to the understanding that it was not good or appropriate for Methodists to be involved in the institution of slavery. It took 50 years to perfect that aspect for the faith and to pass a stronger, better faith for generations to come.

In my life time it took 20 years for the Methodist Church meeting every four years and debating to come to the understanding that God was calling women into ordained ministry. And to change and perfect the faith so that we would leave a more mature, purer faith for those who would follow after.

The work of religion is taking the unperfected faith that we have received and through the difficult process of being part of the institutional church leaving a stronger, purer, better faith for those who follow us.

St. Francis of Assisi began with a spiritual experience of opening himself up to God's presence in the world. People gathered around him in his lifetime to live life in service to others. And when he died he left behind an institution, the Franciscan Order that had an understanding that the faith was about service to others and to the world.

Francis of Assisi died saying, "Praise God, sister death". He died knowing that his spirituality had

become part of a movement in the world that would touch others centuries after he was gone.

So may our spiritual life, working together, leave behind a church that is more mature and pure. At Foundry Church we have a particular calling. There is much the United Methodist Church need to learn from us. There is much that all Christianity needs to learn from us.

Let us be spiritual and then let us bring our spirituality into this place, into this institution to touch a denomination, to touch a movement, to touch a world.