

Spiritual, But Not Religious

a sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth for UU Church of Ellsworth, Maine, February 24, 2013

READINGS:

1. From Erin Donovan, "I think it's time to find Cheesus again," Bangor Daily News. Thursday, February 14, 2013:

I have been thinking that I'd like to go back to church. It has been a vague desire in my mind ... that has been amplified lately by the increasingly verbal state of my children. I cringe every time they wrongly identify a church as a school, a cross as a plus sign, or a priest as a Knight of the Round Table. I knew that they were really in spiritual arrears when I overheard my oldest say about the supposed son of God, "Do you know why they called him Cheesus? Because he loved cheese."

2. From the Rev. Lillian Daniel, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me", a meditation on the United Church of Christ website, August 31, 2011:

On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next you know he's telling me he finds God in sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. ... with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and, did I mention the sunset yet?

Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. ...

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by yourself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on your stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone ... brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want at my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.

THE SERMON

Erin Donovan, writing recently in the Bangor Daily News, says that she has fallen away from the church of her childhood, the Roman Catholic Church, and has become "that modern phenomenon of spiritual but not religious." She adds, "I don't know what that means, however, since all of my spiritual beliefs are unavoidably clothed in the religious trappings I was exposed to. It seems to mean, for the lot of us, that we believe in a higher power but we'd rather go to brunch as opposed to church on Sunday morning. It means we want to go to Heaven, if there is one, because Hell, if there is one, sounds really unpleasant."

Professor of Religion John David Dawson of Haverford College says that several years ago he began teaching a class in *Introduction to Christian Thought* by inviting students to reflect on the nature of religion. One of the students promptly volunteered, "I think of myself as a spiritual person, but I don't have anything to do with religion." Almost the entire class nodded in approval.

Prof. Dawson was prepared to discuss Christian theology. His students wrote "analytical, historically informed senior theses on Starhawk, the Wiccan movement, Wendell Berry, Fritjof Capra's The Tao of Physics, and the mindfulness of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh." Dawson says that these

interests marked his students as “spiritual, but not religious.” They represent that one-fifth of the U.S. population that has no formal relationship with a church or synagogue but is nonetheless engaged in spiritual seeking.

Robert C. Fuller, a professor of religious studies at Bradley University, is the author of a book titled, Spiritual, But Not Religious. He writes, “This phrase probably means different things to different people. The confusion stems from the fact that the words ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ are really synonyms. Both connote belief in a Higher Power of some kind. Both also imply a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with this Higher Power. And finally, both connote an interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship.”

What do we mean by “religious” and “spiritual”?

The confusion between the words “spiritual” and “religious” has less to do with definitions, and more to do with the way we have come to use these words. We tend to associate the word “spiritual” with the private realm of thought and experience, and “religious” with the public realm of participation in a religious community, participation in the rituals of that community, and adherence to denominational doctrines. People tend to be religious within religious communities. People tend to be spiritual by themselves; and no two “spiritual” individuals are spiritual in exactly the same way.

It’s this difference between private spirituality and religious community that prompted the Rev. Lillian Daniel to complain about the “spiritual but not religious” man in the airplane seat next to her. She says that we who *do* attend church not only find God in the sunsets, we’re *also* brave enough to share and test our experiences of the holy in the company of others, others who may challenge our idiosyncracies and might even disagree with us.

How do we tell the difference between “religious” and “spiritual”? Fuller says a group of social scientists studied 346 people representing a wide range of religious backgrounds in an attempt to answer that question. The study group associated “religiousness” with higher levels of interest in church attendance and commitment to orthodox beliefs. “Spirituality” was associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches. The “spiritual but not religious” group was less likely to value religiousness positively, less likely to attend church or engage in prayer, less likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic (or to hold nontraditional beliefs), and more likely to have had mystical experiences. Many have had negative experiences with churches or church leaders.

This negative view of religion might be summed up by stand-up comedian Cathy Ladman who says, “All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt, with different holidays.”

As an example of a “spiritual, but not religious” person, Fuller cites a woman who, after going through a divorce, decided to get into a meditation program to regain some self-esteem and help her lose some weight. The Eastern philosophy that was taught in the meditation class was, at first, of little interest to her. She just wanted to get her life back on track. But when interviewed several years later, after she had explored vegetarianism, mandalas, incense, breathing practices, and crystals, she reported that she was just beginning to grow and was still investigating new spiritual insights. Like many other spiritual seekers, she sees her spirituality as a “journey,” the modern equivalent of a religious pilgrimage.

The Rev. Robert Hardies, senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., spoke of watching people on a bus. One day he noticed what people on the bus were reading – one African-American woman was reading Awake!, the magazine of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. A Latina woman was reading a book in Spanish with a title that translates as “A Metaphysical Guide to Happiness.” And a young white man was reading an anthology called The Best Spiritual Writing of 2002. Three people, alone, very different from one another, all apparently seeking the same thing, whether we call it God, or a Higher Power, or a sense of purpose in life – or perhaps what author Joan

Borysenko calls “a civilization with a heart.”

Whatever it is, many people are on this kind of spiritual journey. Rev. Hardies says that when people discover he is a minister they are likely to say, a little sheepishly, “Well you know, I don’t go to church... but I do consider myself a *spiritual* person.” By which they mean something like: “I care about God, but I could care less about the church.”

Many of us, even though we are in church, have sympathy for this point-of-view. We’ve all seen the TV evangelists who blame hurricanes and AIDS on people they believe are sinning. We’ve seen them engage in political action on behalf of discrimination and warfare and other issues we oppose. We know of the cover-up of the sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church. We know the Mormons and Catholics have spent millions to defeat the freedom to marry for lesbians and gays in California, Maine, and other states.

Lillian Daniel writes, “The church has done some embarrassing things in its day, and I do not want to be associated with a lot of it ... But – here’s a news flash – human beings do a lot of embarrassing, inhumane, cruel and ignorant things, and I don’t want to be associated with them, either. And here we come to the crux of the problem that the spiritual-but-not-religious people have with church. If we could just kick out all of the human beings, we might be able to meet their high standards,” she says. But in the church we are stuck with one another. And so we covenant with one another to walk together in the ways of truth and affection, the best we know now or can learn in the future, so that we might build a better world for our children, and speak to the world in words and deeds of peace and goodwill. *That’s* what it means to be religious.

Both spiritual *and* religious ~

So it is Sunday morning, and here we are in church. Something drew us here today, and it wasn’t our dislike for religious institutions. Something has been drawing independent thinking people here for nearly two hundred years. Rev. William Wiswell, your first minister, who you ordained in 1837, was a religious rebel, a free-thinker and a heretic in his own time.

And if we mean that “spiritual” people are seekers and independent thinkers, and “religious” people are participants in religious communities, then I would argue that we are both spiritual *and* religious. Here we can be both independent and in community.

Rev. Hardies speaks eloquently of his own religious journey, of being forced out of another religious tradition because he is a gay man, and for several years after that telling people that he was “spiritual, but not religious.”

When he finally found a welcoming and affirming religious home at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, he knew right away that he belonged among the Unitarian Universalists, that he was welcomed and accepted for who he was. And he says that he cried through the entire service, and cried *every Sunday* at church for about six months!

He’s not alone. A few of us were lucky enough to be born into a Universalist or Unitarian family. But many of us, upon finding a Unitarian Universalist congregation for the first time, have had similar experiences of discovering a religious home that affirms our spiritual journey in a way we may have thought wasn’t possible.

Here we have a religious community that accepts the fact that we are individuals, and where we need not all agree about Jesus, God, and what it means to be religious. We can have differences in our theology, and yet we are united around common principles. We are part a very old tradition – in Europe we are *200 years older* than the Methodists – and yet we are not chained to old dogmas and doctrines, but have the freedom to think, explore, and grow. We have found a place where we are accepted for who we are, a place where we belong.

Corridors and rooms ~

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” It can also be translated, “there are many rooms.” Rev. Hardies also uses the metaphor of a

house with many rooms to talk about religious life. He says that to be spiritual and not religious is like wandering in the corridors of a big house, “the House of the Holy.” If you just wander in the corridors and hallways, you have the freedom to move about and follow where your conscience leads. But the problem with hallways and corridors is that they can be long and lonely and drafty, and there’s no place to sit down.

Religion happens in the rooms, where there are tables and chairs and fireplaces, and – most importantly – other people. Spirituality tends to be individual, and can be lonely. Religion is practiced in community, in the *rooms* of the house. It is not in the corridors, but in the rooms where the food is served, where people are fed. There we find a table around which stories are told and songs are sung. The rooms are where we are warmed by a community that gets to know us and care about us and looks out for us.

Another reason people come to church is that spirituality is often too hard to do alone. We need community if we want to learn from others – and share our own wisdom. And we need one another if we hope to build a better world. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood that the church is a place where together we can change the world. The Civil Rights Movement was organized in black churches, and eventually gained allies in white churches. Black and white clergy marched together for the freedom and dignity of all Americans. The church is a place where we can speak out for peace, fairness, and equal treatment – to find the prophetic voice that calls on our fellow citizens to live up to the best ideals and traditions of our nation and our faith.

A lot of people are at home this morning. Being a spiritual seeker as an individual is okay, as far as it goes. But I’m not satisfied being spiritual all by myself. Gathering together in religious community is essential to my spirituality.

Here we have an allegiance to one another and to the principles of liberal religion: our support for the freedom of religious expression, affirmation of the value of religious exploration, acceptance of religious differences, understanding of the value of religious community, attentiveness to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, faith in the motive force of love, commitment to ethical living, trust in the ability of reason and conscience, mindfulness of covenant and the democratic process, reverence for the interdependent web of creation, and our gratitude for the gift of life.

Here is where we find the core of our faith. This is what brings us into community with one another. This is what makes us both spiritual and religious

Amen.