

“Spiritual But Not Religious”

Luke 5:1-11

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One of the great gifts of being a member of our church is our proximity to UW-Stout. There are many reasons why this is a gift – there are beautiful plantings around the campus that make it a bit of an oasis, there are great programs like hospitality that offer great opportunities to have delicious meals, the faculty and staff are rich with talent, and one of the best aspects of our location are the chances to interact with the students. Few things keep me engaged with our changing world, more than 9,000 young adults; few things push me to stay open to new ideas and experiences more than a crowd of college students. They ask questions and they never say “but we’ve always done it that way,” and they value experience as much as thinking about things.

A couple of times each year a student or two will make contact with me to inquire about our church’s beliefs. In recent years most of these students begin with the question/statement, “you aren’t part of a denomination are you?” For a while this question baffled me, partly because we are part of one of the original North American Christian denominations and partly because the question is put in such a way that denominationalism is clearly a negative thing.

For quite a while I was offended by this negative image of churches with history and tradition. Though far from perfect, I have always experienced the UCC as a rich source of prophetic and faithful Christianity. So a judgment based on a general opinion about denominations felt rude to me. But once I got over my defensiveness, I began to wonder why these student felt the way they did, why they distrust the historic institutional churches.

I know there are certain religious groups that regularly tell student that denominations are old, that our teachings are wrong, that we constrict faith rather than open it up, that we live in the past. To a certain degree these criticisms have validity, but mostly they are based on generalizations and fundamentalist beliefs.

But there is another longing that underlies the denominational question by some of the students which is somewhat captured in the phrase “spiritual but not religious”. This phrase was the theme of the lecture series I recently attended, and it is a phrase that I have heard spoken by more than college students over the past decade or two. What the phrase means is varied and actually a bit complex.

At least one way to understand it is to think of it like Jesus' teachings about religious people being more concerned with the trappings of faith than they are with feeling and living faithfully. Jesus criticized religious leaders that wore long ornate robes, prayed in public, made their fasting known because it showed they endured hardship for God and so on. These were not bad things in and of themselves, what brought Jesus' criticism is that these same religious leaders treated the poor, the sick, the children, etc. with disdain instead of with compassion. Jesus called them hypocrites. These were some of the same criticisms that were leveled against religious people in the 1960's when hippies and other criticized churches for being more like country clubs or social societies than communities of compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, justice or love.

One dimension of what people mean when they talk about being "spiritual but not religious" is a desire to not be hypocritical or concerned with the trappings of organized religion more than with living an authentic faith. This is a perennial, repeating concern for all religious organizations – as the church, we must always struggle with being faithful to God. The church and all our efforts are meant to serve God's ways, not the glory of the church. It is the concern Jesus raised when he asked: "Is the Sabbath meant to serve people or are people meant to serve the Sabbath?" The answer of course is that the Sabbath is meant to serve God's people, offering rest and an opportunity to consider the divine and the eternal.

When Jesus offered his criticisms of the religious, he was not advocating the destruction of the temple or the end of Judaism, what he desired most was for God's people to live according to their teachings and covenant with God. His desire was to lift the Hebrew people up, not trample them under foot, which in my experience is a far more difficult task.

Another dimension inherent in the phrase "spiritual but not religious", at least for some who use these words, is the desire to actually encounter the divine, to encounter God. Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, spoke of "returning to the source," to actually reconnect with that which is greater than our individual life. Christian mystics often viewed organized religion as a vehicle to know God, but not as an end in itself. Worship, education, acts of compassion and service, these were for some the same as prayer, meditation, fasting and pilgrimage. They are disciplines that can lead a person to experience God, to reconnect with the divine, to return to the source, but they also knew that organized religion can be an impediment to one's relationship to God. Organized religion can suffocate, pronounce judgment on and even denounce various experiences of God that may be authentic and life giving.

Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest who was cast out of the Roman Catholic Church because he rejected the doctrine of original sin, has become a prominent Christian teacher and voice for expanding what are considered authentic experiences of God. He teaches at a seminary in Oakland, CA that is focused on religious leaders' experience of God, more so than learning about God. At the lecture series I attended Fox described the seminaries pedagogy as focusing on "playing the piano instead of learning the mechanics of tuning the piano."

Fox focuses on four paths of Christian spirituality, which are often echoed in other traditions such as Native American Spirituality, Buddhism, Jewish Mysticism and others.

Fox uses Latin titles for these mystic paths.

The first path, though none of these are to be regarded as superior, is the "via positiva". This is the path of wonder, joy and light. This is the path of being struck by the beauty of creation, the awe of childbirth, the great bounty of life. Handel's "Alleluia Chorus" emanates from this experience of God. People often tell me they feel closest to God when they climb mountains, walk in the woods on a full moon night, or look deeply into flower's intricacies. Scientists can experience the divine when they study things great or small. The via positiva is a mystical path that almost all of us have tasted and Fox affirms the pursuit of wonder in all its forms.

The second path is the "via negativa." This path is the path of emptiness, wilderness, even darkness. The desert mothers and fathers like Thomas Merton grasped the importance of going into the wilderness to spend time alone. They knew that there were/are experiences of God that only come when engaging the lonely place. Some of the words of the Beatitudes reflect this path – "blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted." The via negativa has always been part of Christian spirituality and it is reflected in our liturgical year when we explore the sacrifices of Jesus and other saints who have given much of themselves for others.

The third path is the "via creativa". This path emanates from the biblical call to be co-creators with God. It is the path for those who feel closest to God when they are engaged in creating beauty and expressing their soul. All the arts are included in this spiritual path – singing and writing songs, dancing, weaving, acting, playing instruments, painting, taking pictures, sculpting. The via creativa moves what is inside to an outward expression. The church has often struggled with this mystical path and has sought to control what is expressed when and where. One of the central issues in the great schism of thirteenth century Christianity had to do with icons and making images of the divine.

The fourth path is the “via transformativa.” Matthew Fox described this mystical path saying, “a prophet is a mystic in action.” Transforming the ills and destructive structures of our world so that we might more closely resemble God’s ways is the soul of this path. Those who walk this path experience God most fully when they walk with people who suffer from things like the earthquake in Haiti, or when they march for the civil rights of all people. Those who walk this path understand what Jesus’ brother James meant when he wrote: “faith without works is no faith at all.”

If these four paths encompass a significant understanding of what it means to be spiritual, then I believe our church cannot survive without us being spiritual. It is not too much to say that the purpose of the church is to invite us on these spiritual paths. The reason why we organize ourselves in the institution of the church is to foster our journeys toward God. But if the church, or religious institutions in general, focus most of our energy on containing or even preventing full and varied experiences of the divine, then we need to hear the prophetic words to “get out of the way if we can’t lend a hand.”

When people say they are spiritual but not religious, I think what they mean is they want to spend more time on a spiritual journey than they do on upholding creeds, or structures or appearances. If this is true, then those who say these words have something valuable to offer the church. But it is also true that the church can offer much to those who seek a spiritual journey, because these paths are not new and others have walked them before us.