

Spiritual, But Not Religious

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Everyone close your eyes for a moment. We’re going to do some imagining. Not sleeping. Close your eyes, and picture someone who is very religious. This can be a real person – someone famous or someone you know – or it can be a fictional character. But I want you to get a really good look at this person. This person is so extremely religious that you can tell just by looking at them.

Okay, open your eyes. Now it’s time for a pop quiz. If you have a generally favorable opinion of the person you saw, raise your hand. That person seems generally likeable, kind, someone you would want to know. Hands down. Now, if you have a generally unfavorable opinion of the person you saw, raise your hand. That person seems judgmental, condescending, or just weird – someone you would avoid at a party.

I didn’t get a good look at our stats this morning, but for the most part, your answer to the pop quiz depends largely on your generation. Once upon a time, being religious was an honorable thing. It meant you had principles and stuck to them. It meant you recognized forces in the universe bigger than you. It meant depth of character and morality of action. But for many younger people today, being religious is roughly the equivalent of being fanatical. People who

are religious are unthinking, irrational, hypocrites who blindly follow the dogma of their institution.

How did that change happen? I'm not really sure. But there is a growing movement away from churches, synagogues, and other traditional expressions of faith. The U.S. Census doesn't collect any religious data, but there is no shortage of private companies doing their own surveys. One such survey looked at an emerging group in American life – the Nones (n-o-n-e, not n-u-n). When asked to declare their religious affiliation, there have always been people who respond 'none.' But that number exploded in the 1990s, with over 1 million people adding their names to that column every year. In the 2000s, the rate of increase has slowed by half, but that still indicates that every year, 500,000 more people are declaring themselves to be faithless.

Well, actually that's not quite right or fair. They are declaring themselves to be without a religion. But look at how commonly people use the phrase, "I am spiritual but not religious." That's become a popular and socially acceptable way to say that you are interested in faith, in things bigger than yourself, but you are not tied to all the negative things associated with organized religion. Among the Nones, there are people who are bonifide atheists. But there are also skeptics who have been burned by particular churches or experiences who do wish to continue their spiritual quest.

According to another survey, approximately 10% of Americans consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious. This is a pretty diverse group, including those who are blending traditions from multiple sources and those who are turning away from organized institutions of religion. What they have in common, however, is they are intentional about seeking out personal experiences. They want to have some kind of encounter with the holy, even if they can't agree on what to call it.

There are lots of good reasons to be skeptical of religious institutions. I'll be the first one to admit that even though I often represent the church, the church is not perfect. We are an institution, we are made up of imperfect people, and we have gotten things horribly wrong throughout history. We are working on it, trying to atone for the past and make a better future, but I can at least understand why people would walk away from that. It's far harder for me to understand another number that survey revealed. About 17% of Americans consider themselves religious but not spiritual.

I'm not sure exactly what these people meant when they checked that box, but I wonder if there's a clue in our Scripture reading this morning. Paul has gone to Athens, a city known for its philosophers and high-level thinking. It's also a huge cultural center. Kind of like one of us visiting London, or Paris, or Beijing. But Paul isn't there to visit the National Zoo or the Museum of Modern Art. When he tours the city, he's looking at all the religious shrines that are established.

And what he finds is that there are shrines everywhere! Athens was also a very religious city. There is a place to worship every god you can think of, and even one you can't. The Athenians didn't want to accidentally not pray to the right deity, so they actually had a shrine for 'an unknown god.' It was the religious equivalent of having a file marked 'miscellaneous.' Why pray and make sacrifices to a god you don't even know exists? Anyone remember Zeus? Poseidon? Hades? Traditional Greek religion included a whole pantheon of gods, and they were known to act in unpredictable ways. A seemingly simple action could be enough to earn either their favor or their wrath. Your only hope was to try to stay on their good side.

This kind of religious action, however, is not supported by conviction or love. It is motivated by fear. And there are some Christians today that aren't all that different. They come

to worship, or give money, or say a prayer hoping that God will notice them. Hoping that God will decide they can be allowed into heaven. But God is so much more than a bouncer at the gates of heaven.

The good part of spirituality is that it involves a personal quest for holiness. It requires us to think, to act, to search for meaning. We are involved in our faith journey, intentionally deepening our faith. But when we separate ourselves from organized religion, from a faith community, we lose our grounding. The temptation we face is to choose faith that fits what we already believe. The good part of religion is that we have a community to journey with us, to hold us accountable. We are grounded in the history of actions and great thinkers. But when we rely only on the institution, we can get lazy about our personal spiritual growth. We can let someone else do our thinking, our praying, our acting on our behalf.

The truth is, we need both. We need to be spiritual and religious. Surprisingly, in a culture that likes to be defined by either/or, 57% of Americans were able to claim both/and, reporting that they are both religious and spiritual. But for us as United Methodists, there's more to it than even that. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral suggests there are four key elements to holding our faith together: Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.

What we've been talking about so far are tradition and experience. Tradition doesn't mean habit, but rather what does our faith tradition tell us. What does the institution of religion tell us. This includes creeds, hymns, old sermons, books by theologians, and such. Experience refers to that which we have personally been part of. The lifetime of events that informs what you think going forward. In a sense, tradition is religious, and experience is spiritual.

What about the other two sides of the quadrilateral? Reason asks us to use our God-given ability to think through things. As a United Methodist, not only do you not check your brain at

the door, you are invited to engage fully with your faith on a rational and academic level. And Scripture? Well that's kind of obvious. One of the sources that informs us about faith, as Christians, has to be the Bible.

Now some of you may be wondering why have a quadrilateral when we could just have a Wesleyan Square, or Rectangle. But one side of the quadrilateral is supposed to carry more weight than the other three sides. Anyone want to guess? Scripture. (This is the point in seminary when they told me that as a United Methodists, I'm always supposed to capitalize the word 'Scripture.')

Scripture is primary. It's foundational. The other three sides help us to interpret and understand Scripture, but we can never rely on those three alone without Scripture.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was probably one of the most well-read men of his age. He spent hours a day reading theology, ancient and modern. He insisted that all Methodist clergy read at least three hours a day. Yet, he described himself as 'a man of one book.' And that one book, of course, was the Bible. Everything else he read paled in comparison.

We could really say the same of Jesus too. Starting when he goes to the temple at age 12, he reads from, speaks about, and directly quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures. As Christians, we sometimes think that the New Testament is more important to us than the Old Testament. But even though we find our purpose and identity in following Christ, he found his purpose and identity in the Hebrew Scriptures. So it all flows together for us.

We need a healthy, measured balance of spiritual and religious. Of experience and tradition. And also reason. But Scripture is our cornerstone. The Athenians worshiped an Unknown God. But we don't have to. In our Bible, God is revealed to us. We learn that God made the world and everything in it. That he is Lord of heaven and earth. And that in him we

live, and move, and have our being. And though we will have our days when God seems distant, or when we question God's plan, or if he has a plan, or how we fit into that plan, we can know who our God is. We can know Jesus, through his life and teachings. And it's all right here, in the best-selling book the world has ever known. Amen and amen.