

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
October 26, 2008

On Being Religious

Nehemiah 8:1-8; Hebrews 10:19-25

On a Sunday in which we are receiving new members into
the life and ministry of our congregation

I want to reflect a bit on

why the life and ministry of a congregation matters,
why it makes a difference in our society,
and for the sake of God's kingdom,
why it is important for Christians not only to belong to church
but to actually attend worship,
and to engage in the interpretation of scripture,
and to share in spiritual study and learning,
and to enjoy Christian fellowship,
and to join hands in mission and ministry.

* * * * *

Have you ever heard anybody explain why they don't go to church,
or describe themselves by saying,
"Well, I'm spiritual but not religious."?

These days, it is one of the most frequent statements we hear
when the conversation turns to religion,
in America or anywhere else in the West.

On my way back from Iona to Edinburgh this summer
the host at my Bed & Breakfast in the little port town of Oban,
described himself that way.

So I wonder, what do people mean when they say this?
"I'm spiritual but not religious."

*****Do this: Take out a pen or pencil,
or use one in the pew in front of you.
Write down your definition of "spiritual,"
and then of "religious." *****

The Rev. Linda Mercadante is a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister
who teaches theology at MethodistTheological School in Ohio,
and Professor Mercadante has moved beyond speculation

and conducted extensive research
on what people mean when they say
"I'm spiritual but not religious."

When she asks these folks what they mean,
their arguments go something like this...

that churches think they have "a corner on the truth market";
churches demand that personal beliefs, or individual conscience,
be abdicated, in order to conform
to a "corporate mentality";
joining a church means a loss of personal integrity;
churches demand commitment "to things that have no meaning"
churches demand commitment to disagreeable codes of conduct;
and churches profess arbitrary or implausible beliefs.

These same arguments were heard over and over again
in the research.

It's not hard to see where this stereotype of churches comes from.

It is the smoke that arises

from a very real fire burning in American religion:
the raging fire of arrogant religious fundamentalism,
an infernal tempest that has run rampant for centuries
in both Protestantism and Catholicism
doing great damage in the name of God,
and, I believe,
grossly misrepresenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are plenty of churches in America and elsewhere
who will profess to having all the answers and the only answers,
and whose leaders and members are quite willing to condemn
anyone who disagrees with them.

This is the kind of religion that comedian Bill Maher makes fun of
in his upcoming movie "Religulous."

Only the trailer has been released,

and I have to admit that I had a few good laughs
at a couple the interviews Maher does – he's a really funny guy.

But the movie as a whole is really pretty despicable
because it pretends to be something it is not,
and abuses people for the sake of a laugh.

Maher styles his movie as a documentary on religion

but he is neither a journalist, a sociologist, a theologian,
nor even a poet, obviously,
since he has no concept of how to deal with

a religious images, metaphors, or poetry.

Maier is basically a jokester,
and American religion provides him with a lot of fodder.

A more knowledgeable criticism of religion comes from Sam Keen,
who holds a divinity degree
and describes himself as a "recovering Presbyterian."

A few years ago

Keen published a book of *Hymns to an Unknown God*.
He asserts that he is on a spiritual path, but not a religious path,
and he claims that, in fact,
the spiritual path cannot be a religious path
since religions start with the answers,
whereas true spiritual journeying starts with the questions.

Keen believes that

once a person has settled into a religion and its answers
he or she can no longer claim to be on a spiritual quest;

* * * * *

Well, these charges against the church
(and indeed against any form of organized religion)
probably fill us with some rather mixed emotions:
anger, most likely,
either because we believe the charges are unfair,
or because we somewhat agree with some of them,
and probably a little of both.

So having said that I can understand why
many people are turned off by organized religion,
and in fact admitting that I myself am turned off
by much of organized religion,
I want to make the point today that
***it is really not possible
to be spiritual without also being religious.***

We all practice some form of religion;
it's just that some of us are willing to admit it,
while others are not.

Even more, I want to claim that
to forsake religion, and to be non-religious,
is to give up on any possibility of

***sharing in the spiritual quest
with others who are on the same quest.***

It is to be a Lone Ranger on the spiritual journey,
which is not only unhealthy,
it is in fact impossible.

When two or three gather together
to become a fellowship of spiritual questors,
there you have religion,
and you have something quite essential
for healthy human spirituality.

* * * * *

Our two scriptures today shed helpful light
on the essence of the Christian religion.

1) In Nehemiah, this religious gathering begins in a grass-roots way,
by the people gathering in a public place.

They gather of their own accord,
not because they have been ordered to assemble;
it seems they gather with a common spirit and a common purpose.

The scribe Ezra brings the book of the law, their scripture at the time,
and opens it in their presence and reads it.

But it's interesting that it is not Ezra the scribe telling the people
they need to come and listen to a reading of the law,
it is, rather, *the people telling Ezra
to bring the law and read it to them*

We see here a description, perhaps, of the first pulpit,
where Ezra is described as standing on a wooden platform.

(Have you ever wondered why we preachers stand elevated like this?
The first time I saw this pulpit moved off the chancel for a wedding,
I noticed a large square hole cut in the platform
I'm standing on.

I wondered if it might have been an attempt at a trap door.
I suppose there's enough room to keep a collection of preachers
down under the chancel, dropped by the congregation
when the preaching has turned to meddling.)

But it is important to say that the platform and the pulpit
is not a sign of the person's importance or authority,
but of the importance and authority of the scriptures.

The gathering in this passage is called "the assembly."
which, when translated to Greek, becomes *ecclesia*,
from which we get the word "ecclesiastical"
and which in the English Bible is translated simply as "church."

And who is gathered in this assembly, this *ecclesia*?
Men, women and all who could hear with understanding –
that is, even children who are old enough
to begin to comprehend the reading.

And who stands with Ezra?
Thirteen laypeople – elders – who assist him
in reading the law
and in helping the people to interpret it.

Here we have a foundational biblical moment
on which we base our practice of gathering around the Word,
to hear the scriptures read and proclaimed and interpreted.

It is a planned act of the whole people –
not something imposed by a few
who then bind the conscience of the masses,
but a common longing of the masses
to search out and find God's will for their lives,
to see a vision of how God's people are to live on earth.

2) The NT passage from Hebrews is not so much a story
as a letter of encouragement and exhortation.
The author is urging the people to continue gathering together
in the presence and power of the risen Christ
so that they will be able to hold fast in *faith*
and persevere in *hope*
and – as it says –
to *provoke one another to love and good deeds*.

The point here is that the *faith, hope, and love* we learn in Christ
do not just arise naturally in an individual's life –
or maybe they arise naturally,
but under the pressures and problems of life
it is nearly impossible to persevere in faith, hope and love
without the help of a religious community;
that is, a community that meets together regularly,
"religiously" we would say,
and shares in some kind of practice
to keep their hearts holding fast to God.

* * * * *

Now, look back at your definitions of "spiritual" and "religious."
Would you perhaps amend them in some way?
Or perhaps they still seem to fit.

I'll give you my current working definitions of "spiritual" and "religious."

Spirituality – a way of life that is attentive and responsive to God
in every time and place and circumstance.

Religion – words and actions a community speaks and performs together
in order to stay attentive and responsive to God.

The word "religion" itself comes from the Latin *religare*
which means "to bind fast," or "to tie fast," or "fasten."
It has the sense of a binding covenant, a binding obligation to God.

But this summer I came up with another way of thinking about this *religare*,
this binding fast.

Every morning in Rome,

I would awaken early while the rest of the family was asleep.

After pouring my coffee in the kitchen

I would go quietly into the living room of our apartment,
where the windows and curtains had been closed during the night,
making things rather warm and stuffy.

Setting my coffee and reading material on a table,

I would walk over to the window and open the curtain.

Sunlight from the brilliant Italian morning would flood the room.

Next, I would open the tall French windows

that reached nearly to the 18 foot ceilings,
and the cool morning air would flow in and freshen the room.

To keep this light and fresh air filling the room,

I had to *bind back* both the curtains
and the windows on their hinges.

It was a simple little practice of binding back,

but it became a metaphor of my religious life;
it made all the difference in the world to my morning quiet time.

Religion – to bind fast, like binding back a curtain to let in the light,

or binding back a window or a door,
to let the fresh air of morning fill the night darkened room.
Anytime we take any action,
engage in any practice,
live by any rule,
or develop any habits
that are designed to let in God's light and the fresh air of God's Spirit,
we are being religious.

And if our practices are in any way communal,
that is, shared by others, then we are practicing
organized religion.

To try to be spiritual but not religious
to be some kind of spiritual Lone Ranger,
is to be cut off from community,
and to be bereft of any shared tradition,
passed down by those who have gone before.

* * * * *

So we need not be ashamed that we practice organized religion.
Indeed, I urge you
new members and seasoned members alike,
don't let anything get in the way of your practice of religion.

Be religious - be passionately religious!

Apart from the practice of religion,
your spirituality has no way of being expressed.
Apart from the practice of religion,
you have no way of accessing the light of God.
Apart from the practice of religion,
you are closed up in a stuffy room with only yourself.
Be religious, and one day you will find
that you have grown into a deeply spiritual human being,
a human being who walks the earth after the manner of Jesus,
a human being who is attentive to the very presence
of the living God in every moment,
in each and every single moment.