

Spiritual, But Not Religious?: Going Deep
Hosea 8: 11-13; Acts 17: 10-12
April 7, 2013 (First Sunday after Easter)
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I Introduction

This week a new website got launched called SBNR.org. This new organization aims to serve a worldwide population that describes themselves as spiritual but not religious, SBNR, and offers a broad range of resources for people who are on a spiritual quest but are not part of a religious body. This website is in response at least in part to what the Pew Research Center tells us is the most rapidly growing demographic in our country. As you may have read last year, Pew did a very exhaustive study about religion in our country and found that the demographic that was growing the most was those people who, on the form that listed all of the available religious options, checked “none of the above.” So, in church parlance, we’ve started calling these the “nones” -- N-O-N-E-S. And they represent at this point about 20 percent of the population of the United States, almost one in three of folks who are under 30.

We’re going to be kicking off a sermon series this morning that is looking at the whole issue of what it means to be spiritual but not religious, and from my perspective, the sermon series has a couple of goals. One of those goals is to reflect on what we as a body that would be called organized religion -- organized much of the time, anyway -- has to offer people who are on a more, kind of, generalized spiritual quest. I also want to take a look though at what the “nones” have to teach us about how we need to be, being church, at this point in our history.

II. Creating a Different Kind of Church

The Pew report makes very clear that the “nones” are not disinterested in issues of spirituality and faith. Two-thirds of those people believe in God, and over a quarter report that they pray every single day. So, they’re on a spiritual quest, but they have decided that this place is not a helpful place in which to explore it. So, what are they telling us that we need to hear?

Methodist pastor Taylor Burton-Edwards points out that 74 percent of the “nones” grew up in with some religious affiliation, and indeed, most of the rise of the “nones” have come from mainline Protestant churches. Burton-Edwards argues that evangelism in that kind of world is not about helping people get to know us better, right? They know us and have left. I said to the first service they know us and they don’t like us, but I’m not telling you all that!

Philip Clayton who is the Dean of the Claremont School of Theology frames it in maybe a more positive way when he writes, “In my experience, the “nones” are not rejecting God. They are rejecting doctrinal requirements that they no longer find believable, along with the rigid structures of many organized religions. For that reason, the rise of the “nones” may well be a new kind of spiritual awakening, one in which doubters are welcome.”

That feels like a really important piece for me, how we go about becoming a place where doubters are welcome. If you go to our Metropolitan website, nationalchurch.org, you will find these words in our belief statement -- probably most of you didn’t know we had a belief statement on our website, did you? Now, you’ll have to go look. It says, “Faith grows and changes for everyone throughout life’s journey, and

most of us have questions about our faith. We, as Metropolitan, welcome people who are unsure of what they believe and are seeking a community in which to explore their beliefs.” That is our official statement and I’m sticking by it.

But what I want to suggest is while we probably would all agree to that intellectually, I think that we sometimes wrestle with how we internalize that. Because, I think, we often have created this sense in our church and in a lot of churches that we know what we believe and that people who have some doubts and wonder are not encouraged to raise those doubts and questions. And I actually think we all walk around with this, what we think is our dirty little secret, that all the people around us really know what they believe, and I have doubts but I’m not going to share that because I don’t want to look foolish, right? I don’t want to look like I don’t belong here, so I just don’t ask my questions.

And the reality is, of course, doubt in the face of the mystery of God is the exact right response, because we can never know all of who God is, we’re all exploring, none of us has the answers, and we’re all wrestling with this. So, the tragedy, the two-fold tragedy of not being upfront about our doubts and questions is that we don’t get our questions answered or dialogued about, you don’t have the freedom to come and say, “Charlie, tell me about that wacky idea of the trinity. What’s that about?” Or, “how do I go about interpreting the scripture in an age of science?” I mean, those are good questions to have, and if you don’t ask them, we never have conversation about them, and we perpetuate this sense that everybody in the community really knows this stuff, and I’m the one that has the problem. And we don’t create an atmosphere that encourages people who are really wrestling with profound issues of faith to come here

to do that wrestling. None of us has it all figured out, so let's acknowledge that and figure out how we go about searching together.

III. Digging Deep

Which brings me to the title of today's sermon which is "Digging Deep." It is my conviction that one of the great blessings of organized religion is that it provides us with the opportunity and structures with which to dig in to some of these topics and questions in a meaningful way. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about:

Many of you know that I practice a martial art called *aikido*, and most people have only encountered *aikido*, if they have at all, through the moves of a martial artist called Steven Seagal, who -- yes, he's aikidoist, and fortunately is not making any movies anymore. But it was always interesting in the dojo because you always knew immediately when a new Steven Seagal movie came out, because you had this flood of people who would come into the dojo because they'd figured out this was *the* martial art, and they practice really hard for about three months. Then it would get boring and dull, and they'd go off and figure that maybe the real martial art is taekwondo or Kempo or Wing Chun or whatever. It speaks to a tendency that we all have to dabble in stuff, to learn a little bit about a whole range of things. All of us know on some very deep level that if we're going to really get good at any discipline, we've got to dig in, right?

The dabbling is not inappropriate at the beginning of a process to kind of figure out where you harmonize the most, but at some point, you've got figure that here is where I am. We get good at whatever the discipline is when we work through the period

where it gets boring and it gets dull and it gets routinized, because we know that that's how we develop the muscle memory to engage in the discipline.

Music is another good example. You know, you don't get good at any musical instrument or discipline when you dabble. My daughter, who is fabulous, loves the piano; getting her to practice piano is like pushing molasses, because that's not really fun, that's work. And we all know that, again, we've got to dig in to whatever discipline we choose. And once you do that, you start to realize the real depth of the discipline that you have chosen, so that anybody can listen to a beautiful piece of music and enjoy it and appreciate it and get something out of it. But as you start studying composition and structure and understanding how a piece of music is pieced together, you start to develop a greater appreciation and understanding. And as you develop the vocabulary of that discipline, you start to recognize the wonderful and subtle ways in which the practitioners of that discipline engage in it. As you get to know the vocabulary of a musical tradition, you can start to say, "Oh, there's a wonderful play on a Haydn piece in that," or "Wow, I just heard a riff from a Beatles' song in that piece." And you start to develop the vocabulary that allows you to appreciate the music at a deeper and deeper level.

Our faith journey is just like that. You can argue, frankly reasonably, that the reason I am a United Methodist is because my parents were United Methodist, my grandparents were United Methodist, and this is the place where I was raised. And you can reasonably say to me, "Charlie, what makes United Methodism any better than any other tradition, and why is that worth digging into as opposed to Lutheranism or Catholicism or Judaism or Buddhism?" And I would say to you, "You are entirely right. I

am a United Methodist because this is the tradition in which I was raised. But, you know what, it is my tradition and so, I'm going to dig deeply into it." It doesn't mean that somebody who's digging deeply into their Judaism is wrong. It means this is the place that I have been planted, and I'm going to grow into this place only when I commit myself fully to it, when I stop dabbling and I start to get and go deep.

This is also where we start to figure out how we go about living out our spirituality. You know, it's great to be engaged in a meditative and prayer practice all by yourself, but how does that impact life in the world? Well, that all happens as we delve into the peculiarities and particularities of our tradition. So, what does our tradition have to say about care of the earth? What does our tradition have to say about how we structure our economic life? We start to engage that dialogue when we dig into our scriptural witness, when we dig into 3000 years of tradition about our scriptural witness, when we engage with our community in how we live out and structure our lives.

This is, of course, what our story from Acts is about. We're going to be looking at stories of the early church in Acts throughout this series as we move towards Pentecost and the birth of the church. But in this particular part of the story, Paul and Silas have essentially been run out of Thessalonica, and they have fled to a neighboring town of Berea. And as Paul often did, he starts his missionary work by engaging with the people in the local synagogue. Well, the people in Berea listen with great interest to what Paul has to say, and then the Book of Acts tells us they took to Paul's teaching eagerly and studied with him every day.

The Greek word for "study" in this passage is "anakrino" which is a legal term that means "to examine the precedents." It's about, again, digging into the witness deeply

and this is such a wonderful model for what faith discernment should look like. Here is a group of people who are deeply committed to their tradition, who know their scriptures and are willing to dig into them, but they're also open to hearing new ideas and to listening to Paul's experience of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, they take this new experience and they try to integrate it with this witness that is so much a part of who they are and use that witness to validate what Paul is telling them and come to the conclusion that, "Wow, Paul has some really valuable insights for us." And many of those folks then became believers.

This is a wonderful model for what discernment in the community should be about. We have the opposite situation in this passage from Hosea. Hosea was a prophet who was preaching to the northern kingdom of Israel in the late Eighth Century -- and remember, this is a period in history when Israel had been divided into two segments, and we have Judah in the south and then the 10 tribes in the north that became the Kingdom of Israel. Hosea is preaching to those northern 10 tribes in the years immediately before the super power of the day, Assyria, conquered them and dispersed the population. Hosea is calling the people back to faithfulness to their covenant, and he is holding up the fact that the people are doing some spiritual exploration and the king of Israel is actually building altars all over the north in an effort to get people to worship. It's like he's church planting. But Hosea tells him, "You have this rich witness of the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah, in which I have told you what I want from you. And you're ignoring that in your spiritual exploration. You're essentially making it up on your own as you go." And Hosea tells the people not only is that not

helpful, it's actually counterproductive, "so, instead of trying to make it up all new, why don't you go back and look and dig into the tradition, the writings that I have given you?"

I think that the rise of spiritual-but-not-religious folks around the country is a wonderful opportunity for us as the established church to re-look at who we are. Because the folks that are spiritual and not religious -- and there are many of us or many folks who would self-identify that way in our congregation -- would want us to understand that religion stripped of spirituality very quickly becomes dry and dogmatic and dead and fearful and controlling. And that doesn't attract anybody, nor is it faithful to the call God has placed on our lives.

IV. Conclusion

The person who founded the SBNR.org organization is a man by the name of Ian Lawton, who is identified as independent spiritual teacher. And he said in a recent conversation around the launch of this website that people don't need church to be spiritual, and he says, "meeting on Facebook is just as good as meeting in church." Now, you all know that I have my own Facebook issues, and that I should and could be using Facebook more constructively as a communications tool. But I don't think that's right. I think there is something different that happens when we gather in community, when we dig into our tradition and enter into dialogue with one another that doesn't happen on Facebook or in a lot of other places. And I think that's good news that we get to share, that we've got some wisdom to engage in this dialogue with the spiritual-but-not-religious folks, many of whom are here, many of whom are our children, to say

here is why being part of a faith community helps shape who I am and encounter God ever more deeply.

What we bring, what organized religion brings to spirituality is the substance and structure to engage in a journey that is not just about my own opinions but taps into the rich witness of voices over the millennia who have been seeking an encounter with the divine, and to engage in that with the same kind of discipline that we do in any other area of our life as we recognize the necessity to go deep.

Amen.