

Spiritual, But Not Religious?: Going Broad
Proverbs 15: 22-23; Acts 15: 6-11, 22-29
April 14, 2013 (Second Sunday after Easter)
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I Introduction

Last Wednesday night, I was teaching Bible study here, and on the way down from Bible study to my office, I got grabbed by the folks who were running our PFLAG meeting here. PFLAG is the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and it's a support group for families who are trying to figure out how best to engage their gay and lesbian sons and daughters. It's a wonderful ministry, and I'm delighted that they meet here. They asked me to come chat with them for a few minutes because they had a couple of new families who were out of very profound religious backgrounds, and who were really wrestling with the worries that their gay sons and daughters were going to hell. And it was a good conversation.

I spent a lot of time unpacking some of the scriptural witness around the issue and some of our churches' unfortunate positions on this. It was a good conversation, but I left the meeting feeling pretty heartsick about the fact that people's deep faith causes them to worry about the eternal salvation of their children. It was helpful, and I had some fresh insight into a number of conversations that I have had this week stemming out of last week's sermon, where we kicked off this sermon series on addressing the whole community of people who would self-identify as spiritual but not religious.

Now, when I started pulling this sermon series together, I had two goals in mind. One was to challenge us as the Metropolitan community to figure out how we become

safer space for those who are engaged in a spiritual search but may not know how to engage a religious community. And it was also to be invitational to folks who were searching to come talk about what being part of a community of faith, what being religious, has to bring to a spiritual journey. What was interesting after the sermon last week was the number of you who are regular members who came to me and said, “I would self-identify as spiritual but not religious.” And not just casual folks, but also people who spend large parts of their week here at church and who identify themselves as being spiritual but not religious. So, now I’ve figured out that I have to add a third purpose to my sermon series: to encourage all of you that are the regulars that religion is not a bad thing. So, thank you so much for that. I’m not bitter – much(!)

II. The Irony of Dogma

I think that what we are trying to do here then is to reclaim or maybe redefine what it means to be religious. Because I totally get not wanting to be associated with or claiming some dogmas that we may find really difficult to swallow, either for our own philosophical reasons or because we are seeing our friends wrestling with worries that their children are going to hell for being in love with the wrong person. So, I understand wanting to keep that at arm’s length.

But what I want to suggest is that the process by which we have established the doctrines of our church has been, over the centuries, a really interesting and healthy one. A whole group of people came together to reflect on the history of people of faith wrestling with this issue and to be in dialogue with one another on who God is and how we engage God. It’s this dialogue, it’s this willingness to engage each other with

integrity and with intentionality that is what religion is about, not the set of doctrines that may have come out of that or maybe came out of that at some point in our history and we've got, kind of, locked in to those patterns. The process of engaging one another's ideas in substantive ways is a healthy process, and that is what the theological journey is about, that's what it means to be a religious person, from my perspective.

Now, I think in our desire to distance ourselves from some of the doctrines that we find troubling it caused us to push away the word "religion." There's a wonderful Congregationalist pastor named Lillian Daniels who's done a lot of writing over the last couple of years on encouraging us to embrace our faith commitments and to share what we have found to be powerful about them. She wrote the *Huffington Post* essay last year that generated quite a lot of Internet buzz, speaking to folks who identify as spiritual but not religious, but I'm going to have to now qualify that because who she's writing to is people who identify as spiritual but not religious as individuals, but are not part of a broader community of faith. And what she says in this essay is, "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 to me that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring, new insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo."

"Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on 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."

Last week, we talked about that idea of digging deeply into a tradition that we did not invent ourselves. That was the “digging deep” sermon. This sermon, I called “going broad” -- the criticalness of engaging one another in the process of spiritual searching, in the process of theological reflection. I love this idea that Reverend Daniels has that it’s easy to have deep thoughts by oneself, but when you start talking about those deep thoughts with other people, something different happens, right? All of a sudden those ideas are open to critique and criticism and exchange, and we may find our ideas changing a little bit as we engage one another.

This is why the whole idea of conferencing is so important in our Methodist tradition. John Wesley talked a lot about holy conferencing, which is when people of faith come together and start to dialogue with each other about what we believe. And Wesley understood that the Holy Spirit moved when we were talking to each other, not when we were necessarily sitting by ourselves in a state of contemplation, not that that’s bad. But we’ve got to take whatever insights come out of that contemplation and we’ve got to bring that into dialogue with the other people who are on this journey with us. This is the whole idea of iron sharpening iron, because then our ideas start to get clearer and start to get more explicit, more concrete. We start to figure out in a different kind of way what we believe about God and how we live that out in the world. Because, without that iron-sharpening-iron piece, our thoughts about who God is and what God’s calling us to do can very easily start to get, sort of, fuzzy. It’s much, much easier to project our own needs and desires on to God when we don’t have somebody in the community calling us to account for that.

One of my favorite authors is a Canadian by the name of Robertson Davies who, in one of his novels, describes a character this way, “She never thought about God herself, but she had a sleeping regard for him as a being who thought very much as she herself did, though more potently.” That’s the danger of just being on this journey ourselves, and God becomes someone who thinks like we do just a little more potently.

Karen Armstrong, a professor of the history of religion, writes that “people of faith admit in theory that God is utterly transcendent, but they seem sometimes to assume that *they* know exactly who “He” is and what He thinks, loves, and expects. We tend to tame and domesticate God's ‘otherness.’”

III. Our passage from Acts this morning gives us a wonderful model for engaging in this process of iron sharpening iron

This is why this wonderful passage from Acts is, I think, a powerful model for what the process of theological discernment is about. And when I say theological discernment, I don’t want you to think heady, esoteric thoughts about God, because all theology is practical, right? Everything we believe about God shapes how we engage the world around us. So, I’m not just talking about, sort of, speculative systematic theology. All theology, everything we believe about God, becomes incarnate in how we relate to one another and the world around us.

And this passage from Acts is a really interesting one. It takes place at a point in the formation of the early church when more and more gentiles were becoming part of the Christian movement, and the Jews who were at the heart of the original movement are trying to figure out, how do we incorporate these new folks? Paul and Silas are in

Antioch, and there's a group of Christian Jews who are out of the Pharisee tradition, and they were insisting that everybody who was gentile that wanted to be Christian needed to be Jewish first. They needed to undergo circumcision and embrace Judaism fully, and then they could take the next step to embrace Christianity. Paul and Silas say, "No, no. We've got to start looking for some different models." Because frankly, circumcision is going to be a hard sell for an evangelism effort, right? I'm just saying.

So, the wonderful thing about this model is that Silas and Paul and the Pharisees get into this huge, knockdown drag-out with one another, but that's good. They're sharing with one another honestly and openly, they're engaged and debating. Then they broaden the conversation, saying, "Listen, we've got to have a bigger conversation. Let's go to Jerusalem and talk to the apostles and the disciples there and really sort this thing out." That's how doctrine gets established, when people of faith are trying to share their experience of where God is and incorporate that into the tradition of which they're a part. See, the tradition said that all of God's people needed to be circumcised and engaged in all of the laws of ancient Judaism. And Paul and Silas say, "You know what, we get that because we've done it, but we've also experienced these gentiles who have done none of that, and yet the Holy Spirit has also been poured out on them. God's doing something there that we need to pay attention to." So, they engage in this dialogue with one another.

What we believe about God shapes who our community is, shapes how we engage one another and the world around us, and this is important stuff to bring our very best to.

Karen Armstrong also notes that, “we are talking far too much about God these days, and what we say is often facile. In our democratic society, we think that the concept of God should be easy and that religion ought to be accessible to anybody.” It should obviously be accessible, but what she’s saying is that sometimes, in our society, we have a tendency to think that because God is unknowable, that whatever somebody says about God should be treated equally. And what Professor Armstrong is suggesting is, no, there are some thoughts about God that are better than other thoughts, and until those thoughts start to be in dialogue with one another, until we can share some of our thoughts and engage other people to help us refine them, we’re going to be stuck with some mediocre thinking about God, and mediocre thinking about God is going to result in all kinds of other difficulties. So, what Professor Armstrong is urging us to do is to bring our very best minds to this endeavor, engage one another with honesty and integrity, and the Holy Spirit then starts to move.

I think that we often have a hard time engaging in honest theological dialogue with people because of a whole range of reasons. One of them is that we don’t want to offend anybody, right? I mean, we’re all professional, nice people. So, how often have you sat at a table, listening to someone talk about their idea of God and thought, “Okay, that’s the wackiest idea I’ve ever heard.” But we don’t say that, right? We smile and we nod, “Oh, that’s interesting.”

What would it look like if instead of just smiling and nodding, we said something like, “Wow, that’s an interesting idea. How do you think this situation may fit into that?” Or, “Here is an experience I have had that I think may fly in the face of your experience, and how do we reconcile those?” “How does your idea jive with some of the scriptural

witness or the witness of our tradition that is part of the ongoing dialogue over history about who God is?" I mean, what would it look like if we pushed each other lovingly and engaged one another in meaningful theological dialogue? Over the last couple of weeks, people have come up to me and said, "You know, I have found Metropolitan to be such a powerful and wonderful gift in my spiritual journey, but my children aren't interested at all, and they say to me, 'I don't believe what you believe.'" Well, what would happen if we said to our children, "Tell me what you believe and let me tell you what I believe," and we started to engage them in a conversation about who God is and what God calls us to be.

Now, the other risk there, of course, is that, "What if my children start asking me questions I can't answer?" That's a serious question. I often get the response from people that they'll say, "Well, you talk with Charlie about this. Maybe he has the answer."

Now, I love that, because I'm all about building up my own ego, but what I want to suggest to you all is that you all have thoughts about who God is and how you have experienced God and where you think God is calling us -- those places of resonance with what you hear in a sermon, what ministries you see happening in the life of our church. And I think that if we could start articulating those a little bit, we might start to realize what we believe a little bit better. We might start to process that with our children, with the people that are in the pews next to us, and all start to refine our understanding of who God is and where God is calling us.

I also think that there's a piece of this that is difficult, because on some level, what we believe is so much a part of who we are, that to offer that up or even offer that

uncertainty up is to become vulnerable in ways that are very uncomfortable. But that also is a gift to the people with whom we are in relationship. To be able to share, “This is who I think God is. This is where I have seen God moving in my life,” and risk being open to somebody else’s idea and to engage that with openness and honesty and integrity, and trusting that out of that exchange or in the midst of that exchange, God is moving and inviting us to a deeper and deeper level of understanding.

The idea of holy conferencing is that when we engage one another in that way, God is at work. That is part of what religion brings to the journey of spiritual growth. That is why whether or not you all identify yourselves as spiritual but not religious, you’re here as part of the dialogue. That’s what good, healthy religion is about, and it calls us to bring our very best selves to that dialogue.

IV. Conclusion

You see, anybody who thinks that theology is not worth the struggle or that all ideas are equally valid needs to look into the face of a parent who thinks that their child is going to hell for being in love with the wrong person. Or maybe you just need to open up the newspapers and see people blowing each other up because they’ve got some different religious views. What we believe about God matters profoundly and shapes how we live our lives and how the world is engaged. Good theology requires being committed to one another to engage in this search in a healthy way and with passion and energy.

In his wonderful novel about Jewish mysticism, *The Golem*, Gustav Meyrink wrote, “He who seeks after things of the spirit, and does not strive with every atom of his

body -- like a strangling man gasping for air -- can never come to know the secrets of God.”

Amen.