

**Spiritual, But Not Religious?: Going Together**  
**Ezekiel 39: 25-29; Acts 1: 1-8**  
**April 28, 2013 (Fourth Sunday after Easter)**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

When Harry Potter takes the train to Hogwarts, as most of you know, he leaves from Platform 9¾ out of King's Cross Station in London. If you walk around the corner from King's Cross, you'll find a beautiful old church there called St. Paul's. It's on 1 St. Paul's Way that was deconsecrated as a church a number of years ago. But if you go there this morning, you will find a very active, thriving, worshiping community. In January of this year, Britain's first atheist church opened its doors with a meeting called the Sunday Assembly. I'm told it very much resembles a regular church service in that they're taking collections, they're singing songs, they're hearing inspirational words without any mention of God.

Today we're ending a sermon series on the relationship between spirituality and religion. I call this spiritual but not religious because that's how many folks identify being on a spiritual quest but having some reticence about engaging a faith community on that quest. One of the interesting things I learned in the process of preaching this series is that many of the people who are here every Sunday actually self-identify that way. So, because of that, the purpose of the sermons has been threefold. It started off with two goals, one of which was to talk about how we, as a community, might be a more welcoming space for folks who are on a spiritual journey, how we create the room for people to feel like they have a place to explore, a place to doubt, a place to dialogue about those doubts without feeling judged or as though they needed to buy into a

certain set of dogma.

The other purpose of the sermon series was to talk to folks who did identify as spiritual but not religious about what I think our religious tradition has to bring to that spiritual quest. The third purpose, which I tacked on after I started talking to you all, was hopefully encouraging all of us to reclaim that word “religious” because clearly it’s got a lot of baggage for people. I think it offers some really exciting opportunities for how we engage in religious quests, and so we could benefit from reclaiming that word.

## **II. Ending at the Beginning**

Today we’re going to close the series where it logically might have started, which is to talk about the centrality of our community as we journey together to seek God. We all seek community. Apparently even atheists come together to be atheists together. Interestingly, the communities end up looking remarkably like one another. Community, of course, is at the heart of what it means to be religious. John Wesley was very clear on the centrality of coming together as a community as his Methodist movement started. Methodism took off and spread like wildfire across 18<sup>th</sup> century England not because John Wesley was a particularly brilliant theologian. He didn’t come up with any new and dramatic ideas that people gravitated towards, nor was it because he was a fiery preacher, although by all accounts he was.

What made that movement so powerful was that whenever John Wesley was preaching, he seated the congregation with some of his followers who would keep their eye open for the folks who were having a powerful spiritual experience and then they’d engage them in conversation and invite them to join in a small group where the

Methodists studied together. They held one another accountable for their spiritual growth, and provided the structures that took the power of that spiritual experience and turned it into something that could be life-changing. John Wesley understood that we all have spiritual experiences. His word for this was “prevenient grace,” which means the grace that comes before, the grace through which God beckons us into relationship even when we aren’t looking for God, even when we don’t understand who God is. It’s that grace that allows us to feel awe in the beauty of creation. It’s the grace that allows us to empathize with those who are marginalized and suffering. It’s those places where all of us, every person, gets a sense that there is something beyond me that I want to be part of. John Wesley understood that we all have those experiences. We all feel ourselves moved as we walk along the beach at sunset. But then the question is how do we translate that into something that changes our lives? How do we translate that into a way of being?

John Wesley noted throughout his ministry - this is his phrase – “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” We can have those solitary experiences, but it’s when we come together into the body that that starts to impact how we live our lives. In many respects the last several weeks that we have been talking together have all been reflecting on ways in which the community deepens our spiritual quest. You’ve probably noticed that each of the sermons starts with the word going because this is all about being on a journey. We’re all on this journey together as we seek to come to know God. We started talking about “going broad,” which was the phrase I used for the way in which being in dialogue with one another helps us sharpen our understanding of who God is. It helps us get more articulate about what we believe. It forces us to reflect a

little bit on some of the insights that we might have personally. But when we start talking about them, we start to see where the problems might be. It's that whole iron sharpening iron idea.

We also talked about "going deep," which is the way in which our spiritual journeys are enriched as we dig into a tradition that is not our own, and wrestle with the witness of people who have also experienced the divine over the course of millennia, and figure out how that informs our experience. Last week we talked about "going into the unknown" and how our communal rituals point us in the direction of the great mystery of the divine. But religion is not simply about being in community. It's about the kind of community in which we find ourselves, the kind of community that we create. Because the folks at the Sunday Assembly in St. Paul's are in community, and people who join book clubs are in community. People who join rotary clubs are in community. All of those are sources of enrichment for us.

### **III. The Shape of Community**

But our scripture lessons today talk a little bit about the uniqueness of our coming together here in a community of faith, in Christian community. Part of what it means to be religious is that the kind of community that we are in reflects something about who we understand God to be. Harvard Professor Harvey Cox writes, "I frequently meet people who, when they discover that I teach religion, assure me that 'underneath all religions are all really the same.' I used to respond that during a lifetime of studying them, it appeared to me that they are not the same. But since that usually ended the conversation on a disagreeable note, I have recently just let their opinion pass."

“Religious communities,” Professor Cox argues, “are not just like every other communities and each faith tradition has its own particularities that we are called to live into not necessarily in judgment of the others, but to celebrate the peculiarities and particularities of ours.”

Our passage from Ezekiel paints a picture of, at least in part, what that community should look like. It’s important to bear in mind that Ezekiel was a priest in the temple before the Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel was one of that small sub-tribe of Levites that offered the sacrifices on the altar, so that when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they burned the city to the ground. They razed the temple and all of the pieces that were at the center, at the heart, of Israel’s worship life are gone. Ezekiel who had made that his life, who had been responsible for the worshipping life of the community, now finds himself in exile in Babylon trying to figure out who we are when all of the stuff that had marked us as God’s chosen people has been wiped away.

So he starts to paint this picture for the Israelites who are in captivity about what God’s future might look like, and proclaims to them God’s promise that their story is not over, that God has a new chapter for them. He starts talking about the end days when God will gather the community together again in Jerusalem. He starts off talking in this passage about the fact that God’s gathered community has been called first to be a community of holiness which means that they are not just there to find out about God. They are there on a very fundamental level to portray who God is to the world around them. Something about the way we live together in community is a sign of God’s presence. It is a testimony to the people around us even at points as Ezekiel is speaking to the people in captivity, even at the points when we don’t see that.

Congregationalist Minister Lillian Daniel says, “Testimony is calling out that you have seen the light in the midst of darkness. Testimony is telling the story about how you met God even when you might have forgotten it.” Community is not just the way we find God. It is an expression of who God is. This is what our doctrine of the Trinity is about, that God in God’s very essence is community. This one God who called all of creation into being is still in relationship with God’s self - the Father in love with the Son, and the Son in love with the Father, and the Spirit binding all together. So that God in God’s very essence is about being in loving community.

Ezekiel then goes on to point out that the way we reflect God’s holiness is that we care for the most vulnerable in our midst. Ezekiel’s phrase in this wonderful passage is that as God gathers the community together, no one is left behind so that the hallmark of who we are as God’s chosen people is that we bring a special eye to letting no one fall between the cracks, to letting no relationship continue broken, to letting no one self-isolate, to letting no one disengage and detach, that our call is to make sure no one is left behind.

We work on that a lot in our church here in our outreach to the community beyond our walls, in our homeless shelters and our very active hunger ministry programs, in our volunteer service missions and Appalachian service projects and all of the ways that we engage in trying to create a broader community where the most vulnerable are cared for. But that’s also a characteristic of who we are gathered here. It sometimes strikes me, particularly in a church that is as large as ours, that it is easy to avoid engaging the people that seem a little bit difficult to engage. We can just assume that Drema McAllister-Wilson in our congregational care ministry will take care of that.

There are people who are called to that ministry.

What Ezekiel is offering to us is a witness that if we are going to reflect the holiness of God, that gets reflected in every single relationship that we have in our community of faith. We don't have the luxury of gravitating towards the people who think like us or who may look like us or who value the things that we value. Ezekiel calls us to bring great focus to making sure that the people who aren't as connected get connected; the people who aren't as engaged, get engaged; the people who may be a little bit harder to connect with, that we connect with them because who we are in our essence is relational. Who we are gets reflected in every relationship that we have or don't have in this place as well as beyond this place. But the idea that we are to be a sign to the nations is that people should be able to look at the way we relate to one another and see in that God's movement.

One of the reasons that people shy away from the term "religious" is because they look at the way we relate to one another and the world around us and they say, "I don't want a part of that. I don't want to be a part," in the words of the Barna Study that came out a couple of years ago, "I don't want to be part of a community that is intolerant, and judgmental, and homophobic, and hypocritical." Those are the key words that young people between 18 and 26 articulated when they were asked what the church is about.

How we engage in our relationships with one another right here today is a reflection of who we are and who we understand God to be. That, dear friends, is a profound responsibility. But that's what it means to be a community of faith, and Ezekiel offers us a word of hope in that very high calling that it's not all dependent on us, that as

we start to engage in healthy, loving relationships with even the people that we find a little bit challenging – you know who you are! – we open the way for the Holy Spirit to start to move. Ezekiel ends this wonderful passage by saying, “I will pour out my spirit on you.” This is a promise that then gets echoed and fulfilled in this wonderful story that kicks off the Book of Acts as we move towards Pentecost in a couple of weeks.

The disciples all asked Jesus, “is the end of the world coming? Is now the time because we’re ready. We’re excited.” Jesus says, “You don’t need to worry about that. Very shortly, the Holy Spirit is going to be poured out on you and all the work that I have been doing, all of the modeling of what the Kingdom is going to be like, is going to be through the power of the Holy Spirit in your midst.” So that God pours out God’s self on us as we seek to be like God and create a community that mirrors God and enables that to happen. The promise of the Holy Spirit is that you don’t need to worry about the Kingdom of God coming because when the spirit comes, you’re going to be living out of that. The community that we formed here is to be that kingdom that then the rest of the world can look at and be drawn to.

Lillian Daniel has a hilarious essay about being in a yoga class. She’s a minister and she knows that she should be able to center herself in this yoga class, but she just can’t make it happen. Her mind is all over the place and she can’t get calm. She’s thinking uncharitable thoughts about the people around her. She’s just trying to get into the right frame of mind, and she finds that just engaging in that with other people who are in the same struggle ironically makes possible the connection that she was trying so hard to force. She’s talking about the whole class and gets to the end of the class and says, “It is at the end of the yoga class that we bow and say to one another, ‘*Namaste.*’”

That greeting gets translated in English in many ways, but the one I like is this – the divine in me acknowledges the divine in you. She says, “I don’t think we were able to see one another in that way before class. We have to get there together.”

#### **IV. Conclusion**

What the promise of the Holy Spirit is about is that as we start to engage one another with the intent of reflecting God’s love, we start to see the divine in one another because that’s how the Holy Spirit moves and works. To close out the sermon, this is why religion is so, so critical to what it means to be spiritual. Historian Karen Armstrong writes about the prehistoric cave paintings that decorate about 300 caves in the Southern region of France and Northern Spain. The earliest of these cave painting sites date to 30,000 B.C.E. Some of the art works, she says, are more elementary than others. But in all of these caverns, the imagery and layout are very, very similar. Religion, she says, was not something tacked on to the human condition – an optional extra imposed on people by unscrupulous priests.

The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be the defining human characteristic. The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be the defining human characteristic. We all experience the transcendent. All of us, every person, has that experience. What we do here in community is find the ways to structure that and turn it into a way of life. We don’t always do that well. Sometimes that results in a very rigid dogmatic approach to the world that says, “my way of doing this is better than your way, and so you should do it my way.”

I was in conversation with one of you this week about the fact that so much of the

violence that we see reported daily in our world seems to stem from this intolerance of other people's faith tradition. It feels natural to me then to want to pull back and keep religion at arm's length because so much hatred and violence seems to spin out of that. It's easy to develop the idea that if I had kept my own faith tradition a little bit at arm's length, maybe I could relate in a better and more healthy way to the people who have other ways of experiencing God than I do. But I agree very much with Harvey Cox when he says, "I do not agree with those who claim that only people who have no attachment to their own religion can possibly understand another religion." He says, "On the contrary, my participation in my own religion, my experiencing one single faith tradition from the inside deepens my understanding of all."

So, I want to encourage us, as we draw this series to a close, to reclaim in its best sense the word "religion" and what it means to be religious not in a way that is dogmatic, not as an affirmation that we have a corner on God's truth, not because our community is better than any other, but because this place is where we get nurtured, where we get pushed, where we get guided, where we get held accountable, where we are supported and loved. Because, paradoxically, in a community that is set apart by a certain group of beliefs, because of the way we relate to one another we can make this community a source of healing the divisions of the world.

Amen.