

Spiritual, Not Religious

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
January 25, 2015 Annual Meeting Sunday

Romans 12

A colleague shares this story: A pastor and friend of mine – pastor of an African-American congregation located in a dilapidated section of an inner city – was proudly showing me around his new church. His sanctuary had been built and just dedicated at an expense of over 2 million dollars. He showed me the organ, his grand pulpit, the vast seating capacity I was duly impressed.

But after the tour, I asked him, “Sam, are you at all bothered by the fact that your congregation has spent this much money on this fine building in the middle of a neighborhood where there is such terrible poverty?”

Sam shook his head in some chagrin and some aggravation. “You white folk just can’t stand for people to have a good time, particularly if it’s black folk having a good time. This is more than a building. This place is a sermon. That sermon says, ‘If there is ugliness, poverty and despair around you, it’s not because God intended it that way. Here, visibly before you, is what God intended. The world where you live is not the world as God created it to be. Come on inside here and discover what God wants for you.’ This church is free space where folk get a chance to stand up, to shout, to move. This church is a sign, a witness, an act of defiance against the ugliness of the world as it is.”

That’s one view of church, or organized religion. Here is another: A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for prayers, half remained seated. Not only that, but each side shouted at the other, insisting theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved the congregation any closer to solving the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, he sought out the synagogue’s 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in a nursing home and poured out his troubles. “So tell me,” he pleaded, “was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during prayers.”

“No,” answered the old rabbi.

“Ah,” responded the younger man, “then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers.”

“No,” answered the old rabbi.

“Well,” responded the young rabbi, “what we have is complete chaos. Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.”

“Ah,” said the old man, “that was the tradition!”

When two or three are gathered together, can factions and squabbles be far behind? Not exactly the words of Jesus, but too often how many people experience church.

I was talking with a woman in our church just before the beginning of worship last week. She told me how challenging it can be at times to be a church member, yes, even to identify herself as a Christian when she is with friends, few if any of whom have any church connection at all. “All they can talk about” she said, “is how narrow-minded Christians and churches are, how judgmental, how intolerant I don’t know exactly how to tell them” she said, “that the church they are so angry with, so judgmental of, bears no relation to the church I am part of!” I know that feeling.

A number of years ago, Lynn Willeford, a contributing editor of *New Age Journal*, wrote an article for that journal which she titled, “Why I Went Back.” In it, she described her return to church and Sunday worship. The response of her friends and colleagues? “My friends treat me like a time bomb,” she wrote. “Ever since I returned to church after thirty years, they figure there’s no telling what I will do next. After all, which of them could have predicted that I, a college-educated, politically progressive, environmentally concerned feminist, would once again be singing the Doxology? An interest in Eastern religions or Native American rituals would have been hip, even acceptable, but Christianity, that bastion of sin and guilt, of patriarchal dominance and sexual repression, was beyond the pale.” Not a bad description of how the West County, at least in my experience, and in the experience of the church member I quoted, tends to view church...this church.

In this part of the world, we are “spiritual but not religious”; we find the holy, the sacred, at the ocean, in the redwoods, in a brisk run or walk, in Sunday yoga, or gardening or in the sunset – why is God always found in the sunset? People seem so anxious to tell me, when they discover I am a minister, all the many ways the church has hurt them over the years and all the reasons they cannot find God in church but can find God at the beach...at sunset. The talk to me as if I have never experienced God in nature since clearly I never leave the church building. Clearly they, but not you, have been spared my many stories of spiritual experiences while fishing. But to me, there is always something missing from these privately spiritual but not religious stories, stories which to me are not all that unique.

Nobody pokes fun at institutional religion more accurately or entertainingly than Garrison Keillor. Unlike many of our West County critics, he knows church. He once wrote these words about his beloved Minnesota Lutherans, but he could just as easily be talking about any Protestant church – perhaps even ours:

- Lutherans believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud.
- Lutherans believe their pastors will visit them in the hospital, even if they don't notify them that they are there.
- Lutherans believe in miracles and even expect miracles, especially during their stewardship programs or when passing the plate.
- Lutherans feel guilty for not staying to clean up after their own wedding reception in Fellowship Hall.
- Lutherans drink coffee as if it were the Third Sacrament.
- Lutherans open the communion cabinet to all, but keep the coffee cabinet locked tight.
- When Lutherans hear something funny during the sermon, they smile as loudly as they can
- Lutherans still serve Jell-O in the proper liturgical color of the season and think that peas in a tuna noodle casserole add too much color.

And then he adds this: Lutherans are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you are dying, they will comfort you. If you are lonely, they will talk to you, and if you are hungry, they will give you tuna salad!

You know what is missing for me in the "I'm Spiritual but not Religious" mantra. There is no us. It is the chant of disconnected selves, pursuing a self-developed religion. What is missing for me is the tuna salad; what is missing is any sense of community. UCC minister, Lillian Daniel, says it like this: "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 your 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... I want to talk with someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community; someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses."

Former Pittsburgh Steeler star, Mel Blount, has founded two homes for troubled kids. Why did he do that? In his words, "It comes from being a Christian. The Lord said, 'If you love me, then shelter my sheep.' Which says to me, 'If you really love me, you're gonna help the kids.'" Where did he ever learn such stuff? Would you believe... in church? Yes, here in the intolerant, narrow-minded old church, we encounter One in whom we see dimly what we are meant to become – persons who live with a sense of God every moment, who find life an adventure, who are willing to risk ourselves in caring for others, who find our greatest joy not in what we can accumulate, but in what we can give...of ourselves. Here, in the safety and nurture of this community, we really can discuss spiritual and ethical issues freely, can talk seriously about how we might lead the life described in Romans 12: living with love that is genuine, rejoicing and weeping with each other, not repaying evil with evil, but seeking to live peaceably with all. Do we fall short? Of course! But with the support of each other, we also know that, by God's grace, we can begin again. Tomorrow is a new day. I love sunsets and moments of quiet with the redwoods or on a trout stream. But here, in community, is where I grow.

So when our "spiritual but not religious" friends wonder how we can possibly be a part of and support this narrow-minded, intolerant, homo-phobic and mean-spirited institution called church, you can be honest and confess that yes, the church has had a history that is far less than what Jesus would have us be. And you can say that yes, over the years we in the church have worked together and feuded together and just goofed up together, but we continue to do it all together, in community, because guess what... Jesus did it with the same kind of people – saints and sinners every one. And maybe you can even share a story like this one told by Lillian Daniel:

"One evening my father was sitting at my once clean and flawless kitchen counter, littering it with an explosion of newspapers, magazines and coffee cups – all teetering on the edge of chaos. When he gestured to call my attention to something he was reading, a cup went flying, spilling coffee onto the papers in a sticky mess. 'I'll get it,' he said, using a magazine as a mop.

"'No, Dad, it's OK,' I said with a tone that indicated it might be time for him to leave. 'I'll clean it up after you are gone.'

"After he left, I picked up the pieces of the broken coffee cup, mopped up the papers and pulled out the spray-on cleaner. As the fumes of the disinfectant hit my nose and the counter shone again, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was the last time he drank coffee at our counter. I could not have known that I should have paid more attention that night, worried less about the mess and perhaps had him stay just a while longer. Today my counter sparkles, but I want the mess back. I want to see the sticky rim of a coffee cup, mop up newspapers read and discussed and stamped with the date of a happier day.

"But I still have the hope of the table, where my brokenness finds its place in the open arms of Jesus and my eyes are opened in the breaking of the bread... reminders that over the generations God has picked us up, put us back together, and called us precious." All of us, in all our imperfections, pinched from the same loaf and fed from the same cup. And never underestimate the healing power and hope of that shared tuna salad.