

## *“The Divine Way”*

*Proverbs 2:1-8; Luke 9:28-36*

February 27, 2022

Having been a pastor now nearly four years, I’ve got to tell you, there aren’t many parts of the job that aren’t enjoyable. I confess, though, there’s at least one minor irritant and it really has more to do with some people’s reaction to what I do than with the job itself. When I’m out and about in the general public people ask me what I do. Obviously, I reply, “I’m a pastor” and, for the most part, people nod their heads and the conversation moves forward. Here’s the irritating part. Sometimes a person feels compelled at that point to either defend their lack of church participation or explicate in nauseating detail their particular qualms with quote-unquote “organized religion.” And I guess what’s annoying to me is the surprising lack of tact in doing so. Especially when I consider that I’ve met dozens of math teachers, for example, and never once had the audacity to say, “well, I hate math and here are the reasons why any thinking person should avoid it like the plague.”

Particularly vexing to me are those folks who ramble on about WHY they don’t go to church on Sunday mornings, not that I asked to begin with, mind you. Here again, I’ve heard the gamut of things. I’ve heard “I prefer to be out in nature on Sundays, that’s where I encounter God” issued as though it were unassailable logic that I’d obviously agree with and support. One that will always stand out to me was the person who said “I enjoy reading the Sunday New York Times much more than coming to church.” To which I wanted to say – “Great, I’m so glad the world revolves around you what you enjoy, pardon me for giving a rip about, oh, I don’t know, God.”

But anyway, sarcasm aside, I’m finding that these types of people seem to be emboldened by a growing movement here in American as it relates to faith. “Spiritual, but not religious” it’s called. Believe it or not, it’s a quickly mushrooming number of people. Recent surveys indicate that upwards of forty percent of people would readily embrace this faith moniker, spiritual but not religious. It’s grown to be such a significant number of people it’s frequently listed as an option on forms and webpages where people give data about themselves.

“Spiritual but not religious.” Certainly, we stand within a society that has become increasingly enthralled with the idea of spiritual but not religious. In fact, as Rev. Will Willimon noticed, on a recent interview with Piers Morgan, Oprah Winfrey announced that her greatest role was “spiritual leader.” She went on to elaborate “this isn’t about me. I am the messenger to deliver a message of redemption, of hope, of forgiveness, of gratitude, of evolving people to the best of themselves.” “So,” she went on to add, “I am on a personal journey to fulfill the highest expression of myself here as a human being here on earth.” And again, to hear her words with our modern, secular-trained ears, it doesn’t sound half bad. After all, do any of us *not* want to be the best we can be? Does anyone here *really* wish live without redemption or hope or forgiveness or gratitude? No, of course not. And, many people think if those things can somehow be had without all the doctrine and discipline and worship and sacrifice of Christian faith, so much the better.

For those of us who stand inside the church walls Sunday to Sunday, maybe the prospect of being “spiritual but not religious” seems to be where the grass is greener. A happy land where there aren’t committee meetings and usher duty and an hour and a half lost on a Sunday morning that could perhaps be better spent doing a host of other things. Some people within the church actually do venture out into that supposedly greener pasture. Having abandoned quote-unquote organized religion many of these folks have glommed on to a phrase that makes my skin crawl. In fact, one of my friends posted a video on my Facebook wall which has some guy doing a rap about it. If you wonder why I’m sometimes critical of Facebook, well, that’s my thesis statement. “I love Jesus but not the church” these people say. The basic idea behind this being that the church somehow represents the bad aspects of faith whereas just loving Jesus allows for the fullest expression of Christianity. Believe me when I tell you, anybody who says this does so only in ignorance when it comes to what Jesus actually says and if you’re not listening to Jesus, then what, I wonder, precisely ARE you doing? And I hope we wonder, where does all of this come from? What makes people so eager to embrace “Spiritual but not religious” or spout pseudo aphorisms like “I love Jesus but not the church?”

Many of us might want to lay the blame squarely on the shoulders of the 60’s with their hippies and radicalism but the real beginning is much further back in history. The seeds of spiritual but not religious actually begins with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was an 18<sup>th</sup> century movement which thrust humanity into the

modern age. Along with it came scientific method and rational proofs supplanting blind faith and superstition. Now look, the good parts of the Enlightenment aren't inherently bad things. Ultimately, they're the very developments in human thought that have us taking aspirin when we get a headache instead of seeking out leeches or a blood-letter. At the same time, during the Enlightenment, the Christian faith came under a new kind of attack. "God can't be proven," people started to say, mistakenly assuming God was a creature located entirely within his creation. As Christian belief came under greater scrutiny, good, well-meaning Christians began to distance themselves from the factuality of faith itself and moved its center towards experience and sensation.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian theologian Frederich Schleiermacher posited that faith was feeling and intuition not trust and knowledge in Christ's saving Grace. In the same era, philosopher Immanuel Kant turned the world on its ear, penning his most famous phrase of all. "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" he said. Though it seems a mere sentence, it seemed to philosophically break the link between knowledge and faith. A link which had served God's purposes all the way back into the reaches of antiquity and continues into this very day. Even though it's been called deeply into question if not refuted entirely not by theologians but by philosophers seems to make no difference. Once Pandora's box gets opened, there just is no way of turning back. And when you carry all those bad, but well-meaning ideas of Schleiermacher and Kant and a dozen others ahead, toss in an unhealthy and ungodly emphasis on the individual, and you bring it all into 2012 what you're left with is fertile ground for "Spiritual but not religious" and "I love Jesus but not the church."

But dig a little deeper into these two outlooks and what you see staring back at you isn't the God of our Fathers but is instead the figure of ourselves. Humans worshipping human thought, human intellect, human pride. In fact, Karl Barth argued "spirituality" is the means by which we broken humans turn faith into a commodity which we can buy and sell. But this non-sense appeals to a great many people. And believe me, I understand why. If people can locate a place, be it in a Starbucks sipping on a latte and reading the Sunday Times or anywhere else, and get those warm, fuzzy feelings which we all want from faith without doing anything more than letting go of a few ducats, then they're only happy to do so.

And as I began thinking about this during the course of the week, I realized that the thinking behind it isn't too far off from what Peter and James and John want seeing Jesus sparkling on the mountaintop. Now granted, standing and absorbing the full deity of Jesus is a far bit removed from hanging out in a Starbucks on Sunday morning, but I hope you'll see that their response and the response from spiritual but not religious people and I love Jesus but not the church folks are roughly akin. All ultimately want to surround themselves in a place or situation which strikes them as suiting their needs. Perfectly fulfilling for them. But they do so without concern for the either the past or the future and, perhaps more tellingly, without concern for others people down below the mountain who Jesus really wants them to encounter. Having reach an amazing place, a mountaintop where Jesus fully reveals himself as truly God Peter exclaims – "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*" After marching and following Jesus across Judea and up unto a high mountain, Peter and James and John are blessed to receive a palpable reminder of exactly why they're doing so. Here is Jesus, fully revealed as not just some humble carpenter from Nazareth. Here is Jesus sparkling in white, flashing with the power and electricity of lightning itself.

*God revealed in the person of Jesus.* This revelation alone cuts deeply into the flimsy support structure of spiritual but not religious. Here, in the Gospel of Mark, the Scriptures remind us that although we follow a first century Jewish carpenter as our leader, we do so because we, like Saint Paul before us, believe that in Him, in Jesus, the fullness of the deity lives. There is but one God and that God is revealed to us fully ONLY in Jesus Christ. We may encounter sparkles of the divine while out in the mountains on Sunday morning but we cannot and will not ever see the full picture there alone. We encounter God Almighty ONLY in Jesus Christ. One is not a substitute for the other. And although He's our friend, although He's our shepherd, although He came to us in human flesh, this Jesus holds within Him the power of the Almighty God. In the first two verses, John's Gospel tells us that the power of this Jesus was active and operative at the dawn of Creation. The Book of Revelation tells us his power continues into eternity.

Jesus Christ stands as part of our three-fold God. Even though enfleshed, He is no less God than God the Father or God the Holy Spirit. This Jesus transfigured, revealed brings us a reminder of the awesome power

and might the Holy One possesses. And if the revelation of Jesus' full divinity wasn't enough, God the Father Himself announces His significance thundering from the cloud "This is My Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!"

"Listen to HIM" says God the Father. But, I wonder, how can anyone listen to Him if they're spiritual but not religious? How can anyone clearly hear His voice if they say love Jesus but not the church? *Well, not terribly well as it would turn out.*

Consider that Jesus Himself was an observant, faithful man. He went to services at the synagogue. He observed Jewish holy days. He tells us that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them. Jesus himself announces that He's founded the church and given it its discipline. Breaking bread and drinking wine with His apostles, Jesus instituted the sacrament of communion and told His disciples to continually share it with one another. He went on to tell His disciples to baptize people and to teach others to obey everything He commanded. Jesus himself insisted that people believe in Him and believe certain things about Him.

*None of this meshes at all with being spiritual but not religious or loving Jesus without loving the church.* After all, if spirituality can be reduced to garnering good feelings about life while at the same time failing to follow Jesus, then it isn't really much about God, is it? And so thus, it's ultimately about nothing at all other than our self-gratification, an inherently selfish endeavor. "If religion is characterized by doctrine, commands, rituals, and structure, then Jesus isn't your go-to guy for hating religion." In light of the word of God, both "spiritual but not religious" and "I love Jesus but not the church" are completely unhinged –exposed for what they've been all along – sad, empty human idolatry. But on top of that, believe me when I tell you, philosophically they're empty concepts. Puffed up balloons of human pride which deflate at the merest pinprick of intellectual resistance.

Now look, I recognize that at some level, I'm preaching to the choir here, so to speak. At the same time, if roughly 40 percent of our friends and neighbors and colleagues are spiritual but not religious or hating the church while loving Jesus, then we as Christians must, if we're listening to Jesus, figure out what our response should be? Well, one of the ways we might respond is feeling supremely self-assured. We could, with our knowledge and trust in God stand up in our ivory towers, personally enjoying not only our faith but the superiority of our thinking over these poor fools. When engaged by these people we could well unleash an arsenal of theology and philosophy which would leave them in our intellectual wake feeling utterly deflated. I confess, this is my natural tendency.

Do y'all remember the cartoon show Scooby Doo? Well, my Dad always told me that I reminded him of a particular character in that show from its later episodes....Scrappy Doo. Scrappy Doo, in case you didn't know or remember, was a little pup with unbridled passion for tussling with others, hence the name. His first inclination was ALWAYS to rush head-first into a fight. As older, wiser hands hand reached out to hold him back, Scrappy would strain against them uttering his famous catch-phrase, "Lemme at 'em, lemme at 'em." Now when I first started hearing people share their "spiritual but not religious" stories or spouted off about loving Jesus but not the church, I confess that I wasn't far removed from Scrappy Doo. I leapt headlong into the fray. But here's what I discovered. Just being able to win a debate with a person doesn't mean you're actually doing God's will. By that I mean that after jousting with several of these spiritual but not religious types and walking away feeling as though I'd gotten the better of them, I realized something significant.

*I was behaving exactly like Peter and James and John up there on the mountain.* By God's own power and desire, Jesus Christ has been revealed to me and to all of us gathered here today. What a wonderful blessing it is to be the people of God and in the know, so to speak. But if we take that to mean that we can, by wit and wisdom insult or demean someone's heart-felt, but erroneous beliefs, then we've missed the calling that Jesus wants to kick us down the mountaintop to do. If we're more worried about defending the Christian faith than we are about teaching doubters about the power of the Gospel then we ourselves are not listening to Jesus.

Jesus wants me, wants you to make disciples. On this matter He is crystal clear. He wants us, as God's people, shaping and molding the lives of all we encounter by Word and by Spirit. Opening them up to the wonders of real faith in Him. We're to offer them real redemption, real hope, real forgiveness, real gratitude to say nothing of real fulfillment and joy in Jesus our Lord. But we can't rightly do that if we're cruelly twisting the dagger of fact into the fleshy underbellies of spiritual but not religious or I love Jesus but not the church

people. So how then, how should we respond to all these wayward souls - this 40 percent of people who either through ignorance or selfishness stand utterly in darkness? By doing exactly what God the Father told Peter and James and John that day standing up on the mountain –listening to Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says– *“I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”* Listen to HIM!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.