

“Spiritual, Not Religious?”

Isaiah 1

When I was in college I was volunteering with one of the campus ministries one summer. We put on a weekly service at the retirement community and nursing home right off campus. One day we were getting ready for the service and several of us were wheeling the residents who couldn't walk on their own down to the service. We were going over sort of uneven pavement and the staff had forgotten to put a restraint belt on one of the residents. As we hit a rocky patch she fell out of the chair and the rescue squad had to come take her to the hospital to make sure she was okay.

I remember I went inside to where the service was being held to let the clergy person doing the service know. I was 20 and was very shaken up by what I had just seen. The service hadn't started yet and I tried to signal her to come to the back of the church. She was busy setting up the service and looked exasperated that she was being interrupted. When she finally asked what was going on, and I told her, she seemed less than concerned that one of her parishioners had just gone to the hospital. “Well,” she said to me, “there's nothing I can do. You've got it taken care of, right?”

I remember feeling very jaded in that moment. She seemed more concerned with making sure the details of the worship service were just right than she did with the woman who had just been taken to the hospital as well as those who were shaken up about it. It felt like ritual was more important to her than people.

I was reminded of that story when reading the words of Isaiah today. Here Isaiah is telling the people that God really doesn't like their ritual. God tells us that our sacrifices are empty. That there is nothing God likes about burnt offerings. That incense does no good. That festivals are useless. That really all of this stuff we do is just irrelevant. It's a sentiment that my 20 year old self could have identified with readily that day.

And it's a sentiment with which a lot of people, particularly a lot of younger people, can also identify. I used to go by the big cathedrals in Atlanta and Washington, DC and see people sleeping in the doorways on cold nights. It seemed like they were so close physically to the church, but spiritually the church was so far away from them. I'd see the neighborhoods around these big

steeple churches falling apart, yet the churches themselves were worried about things that didn't seem to matter to anyone but themselves. It was easy for me, as a religious person, to get jaded. And it's even easier for those who are suspicious of religion to get even more jaded.

At first glance this passage is the ultimate confirmation that religion is irrelevant. God isn't interested in our ritual. God doesn't want our burnt offerings. God despises the incense and festivals. Even God doesn't like religion.

More than one fifth of Americans describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious". That number rises sharply when you look at those of us in Generation X, particularly those of us who are on the cusp of Generation Y. Ask my friends why they don't go to church and most will tell you "well, I'm spiritual but not religious."

I get what they are saying. Religion just isn't relevant to them. But I always want to say to them, "Of course you are spiritual. We are all spiritual beings because we were created by God." You should just cut out the "I'm spiritual" part because we all are and just say, "I'm not religious." Because religion, not spirituality, is the issue here. Relevance is the issue here. And religion and relevance, unfortunately, rarely seem to go hand in hand.

Somewhere along the line religion got a bad rap. Now, when you look back, religion is not really a bad thing. We tend to think of religion today as all the structure and rules and institutions that we put around spirituality. Religion seems very oppressive to some people, perhaps because so many negative things have been done in the name of it.

The name of religion was used to justify slavery and segregation. It was used to keep women from having full rights. It was used to justify 9/11. It is used in Northern Ireland and Jerusalem and Tehran. The name "religion" has been used to justify some pretty terrible things.

Or rather, it has been misused.

There are several different theories about where the word "religion" comes from. The one many scholars use, which resonates deeply with me, is that it comes from the Latin word religare. Religare means to bind, or to be bound. And in this sense it means to be bound to God. To be in covenant with God. To be a religious person is to live your life in such a way that your connection with God is at the center. To be bound in such a way that God leads you in your life.

And that's why we are here. Because in addition to being spiritual people, which goes without saying, we are also religious people. We are covenant people. And

we are not in a covenant with God all by ourselves. We are in covenant along with many other people of many other places and times. We are in a covenant with a community, some of which is gathered here today.

And community matters. There is a danger in not having community. Especially when you are trying to be bound to God. Community acts as a kind of corrective. Community serves as a way to discern where God is calling us. Community keeps us away from the spiritual danger of self-centeredness and instead provides us with the gift of support and love. Religious community, like our life together in this church, can be a very good thing.

But we have to be careful. Because we are not always that great at doing the right thing. In fact, sometimes people who are reluctant to call themselves Christians act far more Christian than we do. They often do good works. They often take care of those who need help the most. They often do the work of the church. They can't help it. They are spiritual beings who see spiritual needs and respond. It's the most natural thing in the world.

And it's what we in the church can do as well. We in the church sometimes need to be the first to, as we say in the South, "get religion". We need to get bound back to God. We need to get reconnected. And then we need to get relevant. Because being truly religious is about being relevant.

Now, let me say here that there is nothing wrong with ritual in and of itself. We use it as a way to remind ourselves of who we are and whose we are. When we say the Lord's Prayer or we celebrate Communion or we recite the prayer of confession together we are not doing something Isaiah would condemn. Or, at least, if we are being sincere we are not doing something Isaiah would condemn. Ritual isn't bad, but getting caught up in it and engaging in empty ritual means nothing to God. Because empty ritual, where we go through the actions and have no connection to God, isn't religious. It's simply irrelevant. A person can go to church every week and not be a religious person, because they are not connected to God and they are not relevant.

Isaiah tells us what God wants us to do:

1:16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

1:17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

God wants us to choose to do these good works. God wants us to "get religion", get bound back to God, and choose to go out and take care of those who need

our care. Look after the oppressed. Help the widows and orphans. Choose to live out the covenant you have with God. Refuse to become someone who just goes through the motions, and instead become a person for whom religion is calling, a binding, a relationship.

Last Friday, along with other members of the Brattleboro Interfaith Clergy Association, I went down to the quarry in Dummerston. Someone had painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the rocks there. There were swastikas in several places. Along with the other clergy members I attempted to scrub the swastikas off with wire brushes. We all worked together, all representing our respective religious communities, to remove these symbols of hatred.

I'm not sure really how much physical good we did. We tried for over an hour and we got some of it off, but in the end you could still see some of the graffiti. The sand blasters would have to do the real work.

But, in our own small way, we tried to send a message to the people who had drawn the graffiti. "Your hatred will not be tolerated by the religious community here." And we tried to send a message to those who had been targeted: "We will stand up against this, as religious people. As people bound by our covenant with God, we will remember the words of Isaiah. We will stand for justice and against oppression."

That takes a whole lot more than scrubbing at a rock with a wire brush for an hour. Living into our relationship with God and honoring that binding covenant means a daily journey. A journey each hour and each moment. It means truly meaningful actions, and not just empty rituals. It means truly feeding our spirits in community. And it means, truly, "getting religion".

Amen.