

Sermon Series: *Burning Questions for 21st Century Christians*
Sermon I. "Can Christians be Spiritual but not Religious?"

Text: Ephesians 4:11-16

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"But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." Ephesians 4:15

Ten years ago this month, I began my freshman year of college. I remember that the most exciting class of my first semester was titled, "Ethics in Modern America." In the class, we explored a variety of controversial topics, from the limits of animal rights to the role of religion in determining ethical norms. I remember how exhilarating it was to read challenging proposals and then passionately discuss and argue complicated questions weightier than those that had consumed my time and energy in high school. It was an awakening; one of those experiences that expands and enlarges your universe and the thrill of discovery was palpable in the room. That class, and those feelings, came to mind this week as I thought about all those, including my two younger siblings, who are preparing to begin another academic year. But the memory was also provoked by the beginning of this sermon series on important questions for people of Christian faith.

As a pastor, it is my sense that in the contemporary world, Christians are asking some extremely difficult, complex, and significant questions. In response, church leaders and preachers have a choice to make. What is a preacher to do when tough questions are on the table? One response has been to ignore them. To stand behind the pulpit (or walk around the sanctuary) each week and carefully avoid the big questions and issues that people bring with them, choosing instead to preach abstract ethereal platitudes without drawing real world consequences. Perhaps you can tell how I feel about such preaching. Still, there is a way of responding to difficult questions in the church that is even more damaging, which is to answer them all with matter-of-fact certainty and then close the door to any response. The preacher as fountain of universal truth. The preacher as God's sole mouthpiece on earth. The preacher said it. I believe it. That settles it. This, of course, is **not** a problem at Morningside.

Both extremes, avoidance and arrogance, have in common the goal of ending conversation and dialogue, closing the door to transformation and encounter. I do not think this is good for the church, and I don't think it is good for our wider society. If you and I cannot bring our hardest questions to the church, where should we take them? If the church can't engage the issues facing the surrounding culture, we will fade into irrelevance and become relics of a bygone era. Our engagement is a sign of our faithfulness in God who is active in the world. It is in this spirit that we begin our fall sermon series, "Burning Questions for 21st Century Christians", a title so appropriate to these dog days of summer. For five of the next six Sundays, we'll explore together some of the most complex and timely questions facing the church. My hope is that we will all be led into deeper relationship with God and with one another. My prayer is that these questions will be conversation starters for this community of faith.

We begin this morning with a *question* that is most often communicated in the form of a *statement*. It is one of the most common self-definitions among young people as well as those who have become disillusioned with the institutional church, but are determined to hold on to some form of faith. We have all heard it: I am spiritual, but not religious.

Perhaps you've read the dramatic statement written by well-known author Anne Rice and posted first on her Facebook page. The statement began, "'For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity.'" In an interview this week with the Los Angeles Times, Rice summed up her decision, and the choice so many have made to be spiritual but not religious. In response to a question about how one can follow Christ without a church, she said, "I think the basic ritual is simply prayer. It's talking to God, putting things in the hands of God, trusting that you're living in God's world and praying for God's guidance. And being absolutely faithful to the core principles of Jesus' teachings." To hear her describe it, Rice has left the shackles of the institution behind and is finally free to love and trust God without restraint.

And she is not alone. A recent Pew survey showed that 72% of young adults, age eighteen to twenty-nine, described themselves as "more spiritual than religious." Often, this means detachment from organized forms of religious expression (for example, the one in which you now sit) as well as abandonment of the Bible as a source of faith. What remains is a feeling. A sense of individual connection to the divine.

There is also nothing new about this impulse. Our ancestors in the early church encountered a similar spiritualist theology only decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There was great diversity in the early Christian movement, and strong differences of opinion on how to express faith in the resurrected Christ. One faction within the early church was deeply influenced by Gnostic philosophy. The Gnostics (from the Greek word for knowledge) emphasized salvation by secret knowledge and mystic connection to God. Gnostic Christians tended to have disdain for the earthly life and sought to escape this human prison in order to enter the joy of the kingdom. Many believed that Jesus was a spiritual being whose humanity was merely a façade.

In many ways, they were spiritual but not religious, and a number of New Testament letters were written in response to this movement and to the question we pose this morning—can (or, perhaps better, should) Christians be spiritual but not religious? Can we emphasize spiritual connection without religious foundation?

We find one response in the elegant letter to the Ephesians, our scripture lesson this morning. The passage is wordy, but its essence is clear: the call of all Christians is twofold: the work of ministry, and the building up of the body of Christ. That is, we are called to active ministry in the world, and we are called to the community of faith. This dual calling offers a direct response to Gnostic spirituality. In response to divine connection detached from worldly mission, Ephesians offers a call to serve others here and now. In response to individualized faith with no concern for community, Ephesians reminds us that we belong to one another; to the body of Christ.

You might summarize the response this way: bodies, not just spirits, “bodies matter, not just spirits.” Both **our** bodies in service to others and **the** body of Christ to which we belong. Ephesians speaks of joints and ligaments working together to build up the body. This is a theology of incarnation, literally “in the flesh,” which takes seriously the humanity of Christ and our call to be in the world as he was in the world. Incarnate spirituality will not allow us to completely and inwardly withdraw from the world. In fact, it calls us into the world, where the work of ministry takes place.

As I wrote these words earlier this week, the door to my office was open. It was Tuesday morning, and I could hear conversation in the church office. Frustrated with the way my sermon was coming along, I walked out into the welcome center. There I found three of you laughing together with shiny aluminum pans in your hands. Ah yes, I thought. It’s the second Tuesday of the month. Pick-a-pan for Atlanta AIDS Faith and Health. And there you were, with potatoes and peach pies and pot roast for thirty men in need of a good meal and an act of mercy. That’s incarnational faith. When your theology grows arms and legs and reaches out and walks out into the world in service and in love. When spirituality finds real world expression.

Several weeks ago, I found myself editing a sermon in the Minneapolis airport. I settled into a private booth in the Chili’s restaurant, pulled out my laptop, and got to work on finding the right combination of brilliance and humor that makes for a good sermon. I had not been there five minutes when a group of forty young people joined me in the small eating area. I recognized the group immediately, not because I knew any of them, but because of their neon green matching t-shirts. Mission trip. I can’t say for sure, but there is a good possibility that I rolled my eyes. That is, until I saw the backs of their t-shirts. Printed on them was this quote: “Justice is what love looks like in public.” Humbled and grateful, I walked over and asked them about their trip. Here I was trying to write a meaningful sermon and the best one imaginable had just walked through the door. Forty young people working for justice, sharing the love of Christ with others. Instead of vague spirituality, theirs was an incarnational faith. The work of ministry, Ephesians calls it. Putting our bodies into our faith.

And we do not accomplish this ministry all by ourselves. We share this call with the Body of Christ, the community of faith, the church. And this emphasis on community is another response to Gnostic detachment, or its modern counterparts of television and Internet churches. The allure of this kind of worship is obvious: it saves us from the effort of going out (or putting on pants!), we can multi-task and worship on our own time (answer email, take phone calls, brew coffee), and, perhaps most attractively, we don’t get caught up in the hypocrisy and disappointment of the church. After all, the church can be divisive, uncomfortable, hurtful, and awkward.

I understand, and grieve over, these critiques of the church. I nod my head when Anne Rice describes the tragic hurtfulness so many experience in congregations. *And yet* in the church I have seen the presence of God most clearly. When one person offers compassion to another for no practical reason. When a group of diverse people joins together in song and liturgy. When prayers or meals or babysitters or hospital visitors are requested and the church responds. As Kathy Bremer told all of us two weeks ago, it

means so much to know that a community of hundreds is holding you in prayer. Yes, the church will never be perfect. But, as John Calvin wrote nearly five hundred years ago, "*By refusing to acknowledge any church, save one that is completely perfect, we leave no church at all.*"^{iv} And we need the church. It is simply not enough to connect our minds to God as individuals. We need the church. We need to serve. Incarnational faith. Communal mission. Why not respond to exclusive and condemnatory theologies by transforming rather than abandoning religion? That's a movement I want to be a part of!

Last Sunday afternoon, Lily Burana, an author and blogger, posted a response to Anne Rice's decision to leave the Christian church behind. In the piece, cleverly titled "Anne Rice can leave Christianity, but I'm staying," she writes, "Religion can be freighted with heartache, disappointment, uncomfortable adjustment and the dreary slog through the vale of tears. But I believe we can fashion the pieces of a broken heart into a new shape of belief. I'd rather endure the contortions of worship than suffer the bone-dry refuge of refusal or a spiritual life half-lived."^v I say, Amen.

No religious doctrine will ever convey the fullness of God's love and grace. No religious institution will ever extend hospitality as wide and deep as God's welcome to all people. No congregation will ever live out the commands to love God and neighbor with perfect consistency. Our humanity will always get in the way. And yet, doctrines, institutions, and congregations give us words to speak, people with whom to share this journey, and a sense of mission that is so much bigger than our own lives.

Can Christians be spiritual but not religious? This will always be the temptation-- to retreat to abstract ideas and knowledge that remove us from the messiness and disappointment of incarnational faith and communal mission. But discipleship demands more of us, insisting that we join together and embody the presence of God in the world. Such discipleship will always call us into deeper and more risky faith—the kind that has the power to give hope to a broken world and renew our weary spirits. Amen.

ⁱ Leonard Pitts, "Keeping one's faith, but losing one's religion," *Miami Herald*, August 4, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Mitchell Landsberg, "Anne Rice leaves Christianity after 'a kind of confusion, a toxic anger,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: <http://www.religionnewsblog.com>, April 30, 2010.

^{iv} John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, reprinted 1998. Book IV, Chap. I, 17; Beveridge II, 292.

^v Lily Burana, "Anne Rice can leave Christianity, but I'm staying," www.salon.com, August 8, 2010.