

GOD – a moving target

June 16, 2019 –Trinity Sunday

Scripture passage: John 16:1-4, 12-18



How many times have you heard people say "I'm spiritual, but not religious"? Or, "You go to church? I'm not that religious myself, but I *am* spiritual." Friends, acquaintances, total strangers, on TV and radio, Facebook – even bumper stickers! Spiritual-but-not-Religious is all around us now.

Years ago I worked at a medium-sized film business, and after a few months I started to notice that the owner often came in late for work, by about 20 minutes or so. So one morning he explained to me that he'd often get a take-out coffee, then park his car at a point where he could overlook the frozen lake, and watch the sunrise. "Now I'm not religious", he quickly assured me, "but that's my spiritual moment, that's when I connect with something bigger than myself". Spiritual - but not religious.

"Religion" has collected a lot of excess baggage, it's weighed down by negative ideas. Maybe it's a "thou shall not this and thou shall not that" kind of morality that doesn't apply anymore in the 21st century. Or maybe it's because of rich, phoney TV evangelists who know exactly who goes to hell and who doesn't (the ones who send in money). Or, more likely, it is because of the bigotry and the violence that are done in the name of God. And then there's the church scandals around sexual abuse and financial mismanagement. "Religion" has become its own worst enemy, and frankly the church only has itself to blame for it.

So you can understand why "being spiritual" has become almost like a badge (or bumper sticker) of honour; and "religion"... not so much. Yet the so-called "spiritual-but-not-religious" folks are throwing out the baby with the bathwater. They forget it was religious people who built hundreds of hospitals around this country. It was religious people who started the hospice movement, who started Habitat for Humanity, the Canadian Food Grains Bank, Amnesty International, and the list goes on and on. Not *spiritual* people - *religious* people.

Religion at its best is powerful; it can liberate people from drug abuse and spousal abuse, racial abuse, economic abuse. Think Martin Luther King Jr., think Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Bishop Oscar Romero, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, Brother Roger, Dorothy Day. Religion gives value to the exploited, it gives hope to the hopeless, a voice to the voiceless. But somehow... that gets overlooked by the "spiritual but not religious" crowd.

Not to sound flippant, but honestly, anybody can go watch the sun rise over a frozen lake and feel connected to God (that is, anyone with the means to do so). Remember the business owner I mentioned earlier? He may have considered himself spiritual, but he also squeezed his employees for everything he could without even a simple thank-you. How “spiritual” is that...?

For him, and a lot of others like him, the connection between those lovely spiritual feelings and daily life is tenuous at best. Does that kind of spirituality have legs when, say, your partner walks out the door, when your child gets hit by a drunk driver, or when you find out a loved one has cancer?

Now I'm not saying spirituality doesn't matter, because it *does* matter. We are all spiritual beings, our brains are hard-wired for it; and frankly, we should applaud anyone who finds a way to deepen their spirituality. And if a sunrise helps, more power to them.

But... spirituality is only half the equation, it's only one leg. Spirituality on its own is vague, formless, it changes from person to person, and even in one person it will change from day to day, even from hour to hour, depending on how you feel.

That's where religion comes in. Religion gives it definition, it gives it form and shape. It's the 2nd leg you need so you can walk, and get somewhere. If spirituality is somewhere “out there” and kinda vague, then religion is right-here and hands-on. Religion is where you *live* your spirituality. Not alone, but in community, with folks who share the journey with you. Religion is how you *practice* your spirituality; and you know what they say, “practice makes perfect”.

How *do* we practice our spirituality? Well, we're doing it right now: by lighting a candle, reading scripture, and praying - *together*. By singing songs - *together*, by sharing the Peace of Christ - *together*. By celebrating the sacraments *together*. By doing outreach *together*. By laughing and crying *together*.

What practice is there in watching a nice sunset? Or a walk on a pristine beach, or a mysterious forest? You get back home or go to work, and the experience evaporates, it doesn't have the legs to carry you through a tough day.

So here's what I'm proposing. Next time someone goes “I'm-spiritual-but-not-religious” on you, you tell 'em: “Well, I'm spiritual *and* religious.” In fact, the ideal bumper sticker might say something like, “I'm spiritual and religious; there's room for all!” (and no, I don't have a picture of that).

So it's not one-or-the-other. It's not spirituality vs. religion, as if the two cancel each other out. On the contrary: we need both together. That's what Jesus meant when he says: You must be born again, of both water *and* the spirit, you must be born of earth *and* heaven.

In many ways, this is what Jesus seems to indicate when he's talking about the Spirit, in this morning's reading from John, the Spirit who will actually help you become more

grounded right here, on earth. The Spirit who will help us build outposts of God's kingdom *here on earth* as it is in heaven.

Heaven and earth; "I'm spiritual *and* religious". We need 'em both. As religious people, we need spirituality. An awful lot of what we say and do would be empty and meaningless without spirituality. The monthly Taizé services that Ray offers are a wonderful example of spirituality and religion blending together. And as for the spiritual folks, I really believe they would benefit of some good religion. Of course there's a lot of bad religion out there, and unfortunately that's often the kind that's most present in the media, so I understand their distrust.

But what's all that got to do with Trinity Sunday? First off, the Trinity is not some fixed description of God that's written in stone for all times. In fact, if you look for the Trinity in the Bible you'll be hard pressed to find it. Some theologians try very hard to prove it's in the Bible, but really, the Trinity is something that *we humans* came up with, trying to describe the Divine: how the Creator, Jesus and the Spirit relate each other, how they are both different – yet also the same somehow. When you talk about one, you automatically talk about the other two. The concept of the Trinity didn't become official church doctrine until 350 years after Christ, when the Nicene creed was formulated, the Church's first formal creed.

The Trinity is a moving target, it's impossible to pin it down. God is not a triangle, or an all-seeing eye in the sky, or three intersecting circles, or a three-leaf clover, or whatever we humans came up with trying to describe the Divine. These are all ancient metaphors, images that seek to capture what we call "the Trinity". But as soon as you say "this is it", it changes on you, it morphs and transforms into something else, something ever-surprising, something we never thought of before.

On Trinity Sunday, we remember that not only is God in relationship with us, God is in relationship with God's own self. In other words, God *is* relationship. And as we all know, relationships are always dynamic, shifting and transforming. That's why being in relationship is so hard – and so essential.

That is the mystery we call "Trinity": it's not static - dynamic. It's like is an eddy, a current that you can see and feel - but it's impossible to grab and hold it.

It has baffled people right from the get-go. We just heard how Jesus' own disciples drew a blank when Jesus tried to explain the concept of the Spirit to them. Of course they didn't get it, it's not something that can be taught. The only way to get it is to *experience* it. Experience how it swirls about your body and soul, and then about the body and the soul of the person next to you, and the next person - and then back to you. Pure and absolute Love. The Trinity is love, energy, it's action – it's love-in-action.

So you see, you're *spiritual* because you have experienced a little bit of God - during a sunrise, on the beach, on a mountain top, in a forest, wherever. But we're also *religious*, because we have experienced God in history, in shared stories, and what's more: we experience God every single day in community, whenever we practice our innate sense of spirituality in worship.

We are spiritual *and* religious when we have learned that it's not just about me, or my family or my friends or my business or my country – it's about all of us. Being religious means being in relationship – with the Divine and each other.

We are spiritual *and* religious when we have learned to trust God - and give ourselves away, knowing it will be okay. Knowing there's always room for all.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING for JUNE 16, 2019

John 16:1-4, 12-18

John 16:1-4

¹⁶ “I have told you these things so that you won’t abandon your faith. ² For you will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God. ³ This is because they have never known the Father or me. ⁴ Yes, I’m telling you these things now, so that when they happen, you will remember my warning. I didn’t tell you earlier because I was going to be with you for a while longer.

16:12-18

¹² “There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. ¹⁴ He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said, ‘The Spirit will tell you whatever he receives from me.’

¹⁶ “In a little while you won’t see me anymore. But a little while after that, you will see me again.”

¹⁷ Some of the disciples asked each other, “What does he mean when he says, ‘In a little while you won’t see me, but then you will see me,’ and ‘I am going to the Father?’ ¹⁸ And what does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand.”