

Why Church?¹

"Spiritual, not Religious." Right away we think, "Yeah! I want to be that. Not religious." Even church goers don't want to put on their face book page or their e-Harmony questionnaire "religious." You see, nowadays organized religion is a bit un-hip. (I keep saying we're really not that organized). In popular culture, organized religion—church really—has in a lot of places a bad image. Most high profile ministers and priests have had some kind of moral crash and burn event. There are people in the general public who are terrified that the religious political right wants to run the country. So, we understand why the expression "spiritual, not religious" has, by at least one count become the creed of maybe 20 percent of the country.

Pulitzer Prize winner, Annie Dillard, described her church this way:

Week after week I was moved by the pitiableness of the bare linoleum-floored sacristy which no flowers could cheer or soften, by the terrible singing I so loved, by the fatigued Bible readings, the lagging emptiness and dilution of the liturgy, the horrifying vacuity of the sermon, and by the fog of dreary senselessness pervading the whole, which existed alongside, and probably caused, the wonder of the fact that we came; we returned; we showed up; week after week, we went through with it.

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on November 8, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Most people aren't Annie Dillard whose eye for beauty permits her to see a wonderfulness in such a church.

Can't we see how a bright, inquiring person might draw the conclusion that organized religion is not the path? But they don't want to give up on beauty, love, and God and relationships and the mysteries of life. And all of a sudden spiritual, not religious sounds perfect, even liberating.

Do we get some guidance on the question of spiritual, not religious from our faith? I want to propose that we get powerful insight from the mind of Jesus in our text this morning about the two sons. One said to his father defiantly: "Nope, ain't going out there." But he changed his mind and dragged himself out to the fields. His brother said, "Yes sir, right away sir." Then he never showed up.

Now, here's what I want to say in this sermon--the church shows up.

Take the question of people who are different. I wonder about the spiritual, but not religious types. I'm sure her heart is in the right place when it comes to people who might be excluded or belittled. She's read M. Scott Peck's The Road Less Traveled. She votes tolerance and inclusivity and says "differently abled" rather than "crippled."

The church, on the other hand, has Alfonse who is a visitor in worship. Alfonse is clearly different and consumes a lot of attention whenever he shows up. Alfonse stands up for the hymns but he faces the back of the church which is completely disruptive of any worship mood that the poor congregation is trying to develop. During the congregational prayer, Alfonse prays out loud that the Braves will beat the stuffing out of the Reds.

Our spiritual-but-not-religious has read Miroslav Volf's award-winning book, Exclusion and Embrace. She laments the cultural patterns of exclusion that have legitimized the de-centering of certain lifestyle choices. She wishes to embrace all sorts and conditions of humanity.

Back in the church, the religious crowd is trying to figure out how to tell Alfonse that he's got to take a bath if they're going to issue him a choir robe.

Now, of course, I'm making this up. But if you've had much experience in the church, you'll agree that I'm not making it up that much. And here's my point. Religion, the church, with all its warts and defects, shows up. Over and over again the church is confronted with the challenge of actually putting into practice what the Christian life is actually asking of us. Church makes incarnate (which means in the flesh or actual) the

faith in and faith of Jesus Christ. The spiritual-but-not-religious is a collector of bits and pieces of wisdom and insight. This effort of ever searching, ever sampling, is much more about the collecting than putting together something that leaves a footprint in the real world.

How many parents here have spent money to give your kids music lessons? If you have—good for you. If you have spent money for violin lessons, double good for you. Those early months of sour, fingernails on the chalkboard practicing by a six-year-old on a rented violin will either kill you or make you stronger. Now, there's a moment in music lessons when something happens. Great music starts to flow from a seven year old's fingers. It's not played greatly at first. But it's great music. Here you've got a learner violin in the hands of a kid with light-up tennis shoes and something sticky on his face. And there comes the moment when J. S. Bach's Anna Magdalena's Minuet fills the air. Of course, it's not good. But its wonderful. It's Bach, for heaven sakes! Your kid is playing Bach. That's a miracle.

Oh yeah. In your CD collection you've got Heifetz playing Bach. You once actually saw Yudhi Menuhin play with the Detroit Symphony. But—and this is the sermon right here—which is better, which has soul, which is actually working in the

vineyard? Playing Bach or listening to Bach? Which is better, which has soul which is actually working in the vineyard?

Getting in touch with your inner shaman at Stoney Brook

Conference Center or the rummage sale to make up for the funding shortfall for the weekly soup kitchen?

A bit of church history sheds light on this question of "spiritual, but not religious." It wasn't until the year 381 a.d. that the Christian Church, at the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, made it abundantly clear that the Holy Spirit was fully divine and of the same substance as God the Father. It actually took our forebears less time to decide that Jesus Christ was fully divine. You might wonder why there would be hesitation about the Holy Spirit being fully divine.

The answer has to do with the church. The Spirit really is not known or perceived apart from something tangible. Marry the writings of the Bible with the Holy Spirit and you've got the Word of God. When the Spirit falls upon the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, suddenly you've got the body of Christ.

Here's where I'm going with this. The main place where the Holy Spirit makes himself known is the church. What Christians dare to believe is that the personality and power of the congregation—the religious crowd—is Holy Spirit.

It took nearly 400 years for this idea to catch on in part because then, like now, the church was probably a mess. Christian faith is forever becoming incarnate. It's forever trying to teach us that Spirit isn't up there or out there or detached and perfect and pure. No. Spirit gets mixed up in the stuff of life. Get a couple of believers in a room. Bam! Spirit is there. You give your coat—you know, your sharp Columbia Omni-tech waterproof breathable Mt. Kruse Jacket—to the guy traipsing around in January with no home. And the Holy Spirit get involved. You phone up an old friend who hasn't spoken to you in too long because of a falling out. And you patch things up. It's gritty and tender and humiliating. And its wonderfully spiritual. Spirit, or so our faith teaches, is forever diving into something concrete, like Bible, or church, or sacrament, or your effort to not get angry with and contemptuous of someone or the effort not to leer at the girls, or not show off when you make a donation. It's the plain, this-worldly, small potatoes stuff that becomes miracle because Holy Spirit is there.

John Muir is a name we associate with the great outdoors and conservation and the founding of the Sierra Club. Back in 1874 in a high sierra valley along one of the streams that flowed into the Yuba River, John Muir was visiting a friend in

his cabin. It was December. Cold. Night was falling. A storm was blowing in. You'd think that snug in a cabin was just where you'd want to be as the wind bent the junipers and pines. That's not what Muir did. He threw a stick on the fire, and pulled open the door and strode out into the weather. He climbed a high rocky ridge. He then picked out and climbed the highest Douglas Fir he could find. Clinging to the bark, John Muir rode out the storm in all of its glory—color, sound, and primal energy.

When Jesus called the fishermen he called them not only to himself but also to one another—to the group. That was the church really. You see, there's no such thing as Christianity without church. And once you get church it gets messy. Because now you've got a bunch of people messing it up. And that's the whole idea. Because you're now in the real world that God is so big on. You're out in the storm now. The Spirit storm.

Spiritual is fine, but a thin substitute. Spiritual is the cup of tea and the sheepskin blanket in the cabin, listening to the storm. Spiritual is all the right sentiments but never quite out there. Church is being there in the no less than the Father's vineyard.