

“The Myth of Spirituality” **First Presbyterian Church**
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34

New Testament lesson: 2 Timothy 4:1-5

On vacation earlier this month, I read a book titled “Christianity After Religion – the End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening,” by Diana Butler Bass. What does she mean by “the end of church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening?” Butler Bass points to the theory that Christianity has moved through the Age of Faith and the Age of Belief, and is now on the verge of the Age of the Spirit.¹

“If the Age of Faith was a time of “faith *in* Jesus”: and the Age of Belief a period of “belief *about* Christ,” says Butler Bass, than “the Age of the Spirit is best understood as a Christianity based in an “experience *of* Jesus.”² This tracks with research noting that millennials and others seeking a new approach to church and religion are experiential learners and adapters – they want to get their religion through creating and interacting and presenting rather than merely studying and listening.

The question for them isn’t “what do I believe” but rather “how do I believe.” And the answer is experientially, with a hands-on knowledge of religion – and by the way, most everything else they encounter, such as school or work, hobbies or other interests.

It’s like the 19th century preacher who recalled studying a beech tree one afternoon. He noted the color of the leaves, the texture of the bark and the intricacy of the branches. And in that, he experienced a grateful prayer to God as rich as any study of the Bible.

One day, he noticed a squirrel running up the branches, leaping from one to the other, playing in every nook of the great tree. The squirrel moved among the branches as if the trunk were Main Street and the smaller branches country lanes or alleys – somewhere among the branches were his house and daily food! As the preacher reflected on this inquisitive, frolicking squirrel so wonderfully at home in the beech tree, he drew an analogy to our relationship with Scripture. “Well, now,” he thought, “the way to deal with God’s word is not merely to contemplate it, or study it, as a student does; but to live on it, as that squirrel lives on his beech tree.”

¹ Harvey Cox, cited in Butler Bass, Diana, “Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening, HarperOne, 2012, 109.

² IBID.

“Let it be to you spiritually, your house, your home, your food, your medicine, your clothing – the one essential element of your soul’s life and growth.”³

To which I say, “Amen.” However, having an experiential relationship with religion or spirituality apart from the church is just not possible for Christians. It’s a myth – the myth of spirituality, that one can be spiritual but not religious. The Apostle Paul warns us about people being drawn to this and other myths in his second letter to Timothy.

Paul says, “... The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

That of course begs the question, what is sound doctrine. Thankfully, Paul tells us. Earlier in our reading for today, Paul urges Timothy – and us – to proclaim the message – the Gospel – “in view of (Christ’s) appearing and his kingdom.” “In view of Christ’s appearing and his kingdom.” That Jesus Christ came and lived among us, was crucified dead and buried, and on the third day rose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead – that is the core of sound doctrine, that is what all scripture points to and is derived from – Jesus, the Christ.

I don’t care how experiential one is, we can’t live and breathe that doctrine apart from the church, which is the people of God, worshiping and living alongside each other. You can look at it, alright, Christian faith as one might study a tree from the distance. But if you want to get into it and have it get into you – really take on the core of our religious beliefs – you have to spend time crawling all around it – working with and living out our core beliefs, like a squirrel on a great, big tree – finding dead ends, turning in a new direction, discovering a storehouse of food and place of shelter and comfort and protection. And then going out again, exploring some more, over and over again, all lifelong – every nook and cranny of who Jesus is in our lives with God as our center.

The “tree” of religion and spirituality that we explore is the church. It has two main branches – religion and spirituality. Religion is the way we interact with one another as followers of Christ – it’s the beliefs we hold and how they shape our words and actions. And spirituality? Spirituality is the foundation of our religious life. It is our concern for the soul and human spirit above and beyond worldly things.

So, those who count themselves “spiritual but not religious” – not connected to any church – are actually limited in their development as Christians – if they even see themselves as Christians, which many do.

³ Charles Hadden Spurgeon, sermon preached at the Tabernacle, London. Autobiography, revised edition (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 218.

But they're not fully Christian – not unless they crawl out on a limb with us – a limb called “the church” – crawl out there and explore what it is to be a follower of Christ in a community of faith.

The church has many branches. Some are dead ends. Some are covered with knots and other rough places hard to get over. Some areas of the church are more pleasant than others, offering a better view and more comfortable perch. And sitting on all the different branches and limbs that make up the church are birds of every kind – people who differ in many ways. That's what a healthy church looks like.

We, as a healthy church, have lots of different people- some of us are odd birds- no doubt with different likes and dislikes, ways and means, backgrounds and hopes for the future. And the one thing that holds us together is the core of our belief – that Jesus Christ came and lived among us, was crucified dead and buried, and on the third day rose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

As we live out our faith together as the church – and welcome new, younger people into our community of faith – we must adhere to our core belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior while allowing room for and developing more experiential ways of encountering that faith, interacting with it, letting it sink into who we are, and sharing it with the world.

As we do this – as the gathering of odd birds that we are – we will disagree on many things – styles of worship, times and places for meetings, and even what's the best way to express and live out our faith.

But, if we hang together – even amid our disagreements, our varying preferences, and our shared, limited and differing understandings of religion and Christianity – if we hang together as Christians, we will not only persevere but we will thrive.

And that's true for this church, and all Christian churches, and the Christian faith in general. So, what does this mean for us as individuals? What this means is that we continue to seek ways to be gracious and patient with one another. Or as Paul says, “... be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience ...”

Paul purposefully holds us to a two-fold call to stand up for the Gospel while also reflecting the spirit of Christ. That's not an easy call to undertake and maintain. But it is possible. And it is a joy.

Ask yourself, what brings you the most joy in life, as a Christian? Honestly, isn't it giving of yourself for the sake of others, and trusting God to provide all that we could ever need?

That's what we learn how to do – over and over again – through the church – giving of ourselves while trusting in God? That's how we stay true to our calling as followers of Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Great and faithful God, truth seems to be a rare commodity in our world today. Lies, half-truths and misinformation are defended and justified, while truth-telling in the public arena, as well as in our private lives, is often criticized and frequently ignored. Against that backdrop, your Word stands as a beacon of truth that is timeless, certain and trustworthy.

We thank you that your Word is new each time we read it; that it remains relevant no matter how the world changes; that it is a reliable witness to your ongoing presence and activity in our lives.

Lord, we are also mindful that one of the surest words you ever spoke is, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Remind those who need your presence now of that eternal truth – that neither death nor life, neither messenger of Heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

For it is in his name that we pray, as he taught, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.
Amen.**