

“Into the Fray: SBNR”

Ephesians 4:11-16

February 10, 2019

What is a preacher to do when tough topics are on the table? Christians today face some extremely difficult, complicated, and significant questions. And often we do so in the vacuum of likeminded perspectives or through the one-sided diatribes of much contemporary so-called discourse. One response has been to ignore them completely—choosing to preach ethereal platitudes without drawing real-world consequences. Another option is to proudly pontificate on the given topic, offering absolute truth with no admission of our own limitation. The preacher said it. I believe it. That settles it. This, of course, is *not* a problem at Second Presbyterian Church! This week someone sent me a cartoon that shows a parishioner greeting the pastor at the door of the sanctuary after worship. The parishioner says, “Fine sermon, but it was a little preachy.”

Anxious avoidance or preachy pontification? Both extremes miss the mark. Both approaches silence dialogue, close the door to encounter and transformation. I do not think this is good for the church, and I don’t think it is good for the mission to which we are called. If you and I cannot bring our hardest questions to this sacred place, where should we take them? It is in this spirit that we dive into the fray together, exploring some of the more complex and timely questions facing the church.

This morning’s topic is most often communicated as an identity *statement*. It is a common self-definition among those who have become disillusioned with the church. And some surveys suggest that it is the fastest growing segment of the American population. The SBNRs, also referred to as the “Nones” (that’s N-O-N-E) or the “Done” (that’s, “Done with Church”). SBNR. “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Historically the two words have been held closely together; the distinction between them is a relatively recent development. Research suggests that they’ve been divided in this way—“spiritual” has come to be associated with the private realm of personal connection to God while “religious” refers to institutions, organizations, denominational structures, rituals, and requirements.

I want to begin by confessing that I am sympathetic to the SBNR movement. I understand its appeal. The effort to have spirituality without religion seems to me like an admirable attempt to separate faith from the messiness of human life. To break away from the shackles of institutionalism and the hypocrisy that inevitably comes in community. To have the purity of divine experience without the brokenness of human encounter.

I mentioned the growing popularity of the SBNR movement in our time, but I hasten to add a caveat to that statistic. Despite some of the claims you’ll hear in the media, “spiritual but not religious” is not a modern phenomenon. Our ancestors in the early church encountered a spirituality movement only decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. All the centuries later, we tend to forget that 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 emphasized salvation by mystic connection to God. They tended to have disdain for the earthly life and sought to escape this human prison in order to enter the joy of God’s 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 respond to the questions posed by this movement. Can Christians have spiritual connection without religious foundation?

We find one response in the elegant letter to the Ephesians. This morning’s passage offers a direct response to the claims of spiritualism. Instead of divine connection detached from the needs of others, Ephesians calls us to “the work of ministry”, service and mission in our communities. Rather than an individual, privatized faith, Ephesians reminds us that we are the *body* of Christ. Ephesians speaks not of escaping souls but of joints and ligaments working together in harmony. This is a theology of incarnation, which takes seriously the humanity of Jesus and our call to be in the world as he was in the world. 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.

I have many friends who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious—it comes with the territory of being a pastor at the leading edge of the millennial generation. They are good people who believe in love and doing the right thing. They make claims of faith, believing in a supreme being. Often, they reserve their deepest criticism for the church, describing it as a place of discord and hypocrisy. A painful mockery of the picture painted in scripture of Christ's call to his disciples. They point to experiences of judgment, exclusion, or outright hatred they have had in the institutions of the Christian movement.

They are right to be critical. I grieve over these failures of the church to live out its high calling. But I also know that I need the church. I need you. It is simply not enough to connect to God as disembodied souls or brilliant minds. We need to be part of the body of Christ. We need the church. We need to serve. Incarnational faith. Communal mission. So, here is my challenge to my SBNR friends. Why not respond to exclusive and condemnatory theologies by transforming rather than abandoning the church? Always disappointing, never complete, ever struggling to be faithful, consistently inconsistent, and broken—we need the church, because we are the church.

Preacher Lillian Daniel describes the church as people who are stuck with each another, bound by our common humanity and brought close through community. She writes, *"It's as close as the guy singing out of tune next to you in your pew, as close as the woman who doesn't have access to a shower and didn't bathe before worship, as close as the baby screaming and as close as the mother who doesn't seem to realize that the baby is driving everyone crazy. It's as close as that same mother who crawled out from her postpartum depression to get herself to church today and wonders if there is a place for her there. It's as close as the preacher who didn't prepare enough and as close as the listener who is so thirsty for a word that she leans forward for absolutely anything. With the humbling realization that there are some things we simply cannot do for ourselves, communities of human beings have worked together and feuded together and just goofed up together. They come together because Jesus came to live with these same types of people. Thousands of years later, we're still trying to be the body of Christ..."*¹

I would add this—it is in the trying that we find the Spirit.

Here's the truth: no confession of faith will ever convey the universality of God's love and grace. No institution will ever fully express 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, confessions, institutions, and congregations give us words to speak, people with whom to share this journey, and a sense of mission much bigger than our own lives.

A couple of weeks ago I was having a conversation with Bill Enright, who in addition to serving as Senior Pastor of this great church for nearly a quarter-century has also consulted with thousands of congregations over the years. He shared a critique of the church, a pervasive weakness that he has found. Churches are not well-equipped in the art of storytelling. We don't always do a good job of sharing the impact of the ministries and missions we pursue. Bill is so right about that, and his observation brought me back to this morning's text—the gifts God has given us are meant to be used to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Who are those saints called to the work of ministry? You! And me! What is that work? It is as diverse as the gifts we've been given. Just one story to share this morning. A little over a year ago, moved by the call of Jesus to welcome strangers and the deep needs of so many in our world, a group of Second members formed a Refugee Ministry Team. Soon after, they welcomed a Congolese family of twelve to Indianapolis. This blended family arrived after almost twenty years at a refugee camp in Tanzania. Almost two decades in what was meant to be a temporary home. Well the family arrived, the children had never lived anywhere except that refugee camp. And members of this community, responding to their call to serve and banding together to make a difference, met them at the airport, furnished a home, provided meals and rides to appointments and tutoring and support of every kind. To be the church is to embody God's call together. We need to know these powerful stories.

Glennon Melton writes about embodied community on her blog, Momastery (get it?). A couple years ago, she published a post titled, "My Church." She began by recounting a conversation with a friend who was leaving the church in frustration with all the anger and fear that has come to define Christianity. In response, Melton shares her own testimony, why she leaves her church feeling reborn and hopeful. She writes, *"Listen, the reason we are all so down about 'church' is that we are calling what is going on online and on TV something it's not. None of this is about church.*

You will not find church in Facebook updates or witty tweets or biting essays or debates. Church is something else. Church is what happens when folks meet face to face and sing together. Church happens when folks who think differently from each other have no computer to hide behind and are forced to shake hands. Church happens when folks stand shoulder to shoulder and ask God for help. Church is people sweating and serving together. Church is community. Church is not ISSUES and it's not beliefs and it's nothing that needs to be defended – for God's sake. Church is a group of folks working their stuff out together, gently. There is no shortcut to church. It's slow, and it's real life, and you have to show up for it.”ⁱⁱ

Spiritual but not religious; this will always be the temptation-- to retreat and isolate from the messiness and disappointment of incarnational faith and communal life. But being disciples of Jesus demands more of us. This world needs more *from* us; that we join together and embody the presence of God in the world; a risky and consequential faith—the kind that has the power to give hope to a broken world and renew our weary spirits. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-08/you-can-t-make>

ⁱⁱ <http://momastery.com/blog/2013/>