

“Spiritual and Religious,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on May 23, 2010

In the Christian calendar, today is Pentecost. Pentecost was a Hebrew harvest festival, and the story, as told in the book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles, says that the followers of Jesus, 120 of them, who of course we all Jewish, were gathered together some time after he had been killed. And on that day the holy spirit appeared to them. Tongues of fire descended on a rushing wind, and suddenly each person was speaking in tongues, speaking a different language. But the crowd that gathered heard and understood what they were saying, as if in their own language. It's kind of like the Tower of Babel in reverse.

Do I believe that the holy spirit literally appeared to the disciples in the way it's described, with tongues of fire? No. It's a story, a metaphor. Do I believe that they experienced the presence of the holy spirit, and that we have that capacity too? Absolutely.

But we live in a world that is dramatically different than that Mediterranean two thousand years ago. Back then there was no line between the sacred and the secular-- religion was everywhere and part of everyday life; not something you did once a week. This is why I'd like to visit India someday; because that culture is more like the ancient world, where people are open to the spirit in their daily lives in ways we Westerners don't seem to understand or know how to practice.

We've all heard people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." I get this; I understand that people find the holy out in nature, or in their work, or in their activism, among their family and friends. I understand that many have been disappointed or betrayed by the institutional church; that some folk's view of religion is formed by what they see on TV, where religious extremists and leaders who get caught in scandalous and hypocritical acts get most of the coverage. I understand why, for all these reasons, people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." Still, I suspect that, for some people, this is cover for the fact that where they really want to spend Sunday morning is on the golf course or with the New York Times.

I have to say I'm tired of "spiritual but not religious." It asserts what is a false dichotomy--that one doesn't need the other. The next time someone tells me they are spiritual but not religious, I want to ask them, "How's that working out for you? How do you practice your spirituality? Do you care about others as much as yourself? Are you living a healthy and helpful life?"

You see, I sense that many people who say they are spiritual but not religious are kidding themselves. I sense that they may dabble a bit in some kind of practice, might

read a spiritual magazine or book every now and then, but I don't know many people who practice their spirituality faithfully all on their own. It's too hard; there are too many distractions. And who's there to keep you accountable, to tell you when your practice has become spiritual narcissism?

A few years ago I was asked to conduct the funeral of someone who was not a churchgoer. Meeting with the family, they told me they used to belong to a church, but they'd stopped going. But they told me they watched church on TV most every Sunday, from the Crystal Cathedral in California. One said, "Now that Rev. Schuller, he can preach. I'd go to church if I could hear preaching like that!" They told me they sent money off to this church in California, which they had never attended, but which they worshipped in from their living room.

I would never say this to them in their time of grief, but I couldn't help thinking, "Where are the ministers from that church right now? Were any of them showing up on a snowy morning, like I was, to help plan their beloved family member's funeral? Would any of the good folks in that congregation in California be bringing by a casserole later, or sending them a hand written condolence note? I understand there are plenty of good reasons people don't belong to a faith community. But "spiritual but not religious" sounds awfully lonely to me.

Do you have any doubt there's a deep spiritual hunger in our society? You see it in our appetite for food, for alcohol, for overwork, for entertainment. We are restless people. There are all kinds of companies in America that cater to our hunger--that offer all kinds of things that promise to make us happy and whole. They tell us this with persuasive words and images, that what they have will make us happy. What they never tell us, of course, is the truth. The truth that the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer knew. He said, "The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve." One of the best reasons to be religious, to be part of a faith community, is that it provides you a place where you can serve.

I could spend all my time today trying to define those words 'spiritual' and 'religious', but I'm not going to do that. I'll just say that spirituality is about being open to and in touch with that presence, whatever we call it, in which we live and move and have our being; that reality which is close but elusive, that most of us experience at least now and then. To be spiritual is to open to experiencing that presence. Religious is often understood as synonymous with the institutional church, and limited to rules, dogma and hierarchy. But the word religion means "to bind together." To be religious is to seek wholeness and holiness; it's not either/or but both/and.

Religion naturally includes the spiritual. Religion involves practices and relationships which provide grounding, that balances the spiritual, which tends to be airy and elusive. The idea that you can split the two apart reminds me of a time, years ago, when I was working as a photographer in Washington, DC. I was a fly fisherman back then too, and one day a friend, who was also a photographer and fisherman, asked if I

would go out the Shenandoah mountains in Virginia, to fish and take pictures. He had an idea for a photograph and needed a model. He'd been told about a pretty river several hours west of DC, so we left town early, with our photo gear and fishing tackle, with coffee and high hopes.

When we got to the river, we stood on a bridge and looked over. It was a beautiful spot, and a good place to photograph. The riverbed, cobbled with rounded stones in a variety of hues, wound through the trees. There was only one problem. There was not one drop of water in that river--it was dry as a bone. It was like a bad joke, and we stood there, said some choice words about the one who had sent us, and had a good laugh.

Religion without spirituality is like trying to fish in that dry river. What's the point? And to extend the metaphor, an individualized spirituality, spirituality without religion, is like fishing in unfamiliar waters without companions or a guide. It can be fun, but it can also be lonely. It's easy to get lost, and end up at a stream that's either bone dry or too deep to wade into.

Don't get me wrong--I'm not saying we need constant companionship. The spiritual life certainly includes solitude. I love fishing a river all by myself. But just as much, I love coming back home. If I'm fishing with a friend, I like to wander off on my own. But I love connecting with my buddy at lunchtime and sharing our stories. The church is kind of like a fishing lodge, where you show up at the end of the day, and warm yourself by the fire, and people tell stories, and comfort and commiserate with one another.

A friend of mine who's a minister told me about when he had a rare Sunday off. He was at home, enjoying a quiet morning with his family, but they needed something, so he went to the grocery store. He says he was astounded by all the people there on Sunday morning. He said, "So this is where everyone is on Sunday morning when I'm in church!" My friend said he fantasizes about bringing church to those folks in the grocery store, preaching to them as they push their carts up and down the aisles.

I understand what he's saying. I think there are plenty of people who could benefit from an hour of church. But grocery store preaching is not my style. I like to be here on Sunday morning. Still, I wonder about those people, who right now are in the grocery store, on the golf course, playing little league. Do they get a chance to touch what is deep and holy? Do they have a community that feels like home?

Hear again the questions Burton Carley asked in our reading this morning: "Have you ever felt the Spirit? Felt it tingle your toes, run up your spine, water your eyes, race your heart, pull you down to your knees, take your breath away? Is it not Holy, this appreciative awareness of quality, this connection to what matters, the sparking of transcendence?"

He ask us, “Why don’t we want to stay in the presence of the Holy Spirit? Why don’t we cry in agony when it is absent? Why aren’t we doing everything in our power to catch it and keep it, to live in its glory, to be captured by it and to, yes, surrender to it? It is as if we have silenced the voice of the whirlwind and doused the flame of the burning bush, and we no longer can find that compelling voice that requires of us great things, that stirs us beyond ourselves. When we lose the capacity to speak in the metaphoric language of ultimate agency we exhibit a poverty of spirit.”¹

This is what ails us, as individuals and as a nation. A poverty of spirit. The spirit hasn’t gone away. We are just less able, and less willing, to apprehend it. We don’t know that is what we’re really hungry for.

You don’t have to go to the ends of the earth. The spirit is very near you. But it helps to be receptive, to be expectant, to invite the spirit in. It helps to practice. It’s essential, in my experience, to have a community. One that will support and befriend you, and that will keep you honest, will tell you the truth when you need to hear it.

That community is not just those who are here right now. We are part of a long tradition of saints and seekers, women and men who knew how to be both spiritual and religious; who knew how to love God, and how to love their neighbors. We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. The spirit they knew is in our midst. So let us be open to it, and let us live these lives we have been given with purpose and with gratitude and with joy.

Amen.

¹ Burton Carley, “The Way Home,” available at <http://www.oulduuma.org/BerryStreet/Essays/BSE2005.htm>