

Spiritual and Religious
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Reading – Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii^[a] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Sermon

We heard the parable of the Good Samaritan earlier. Jesus reminding us that sometimes our neighbor may be someone we would least expect to have qualities of neighborliness... or might be someone who is one way or another quite different from us.

All considerations which should be quite beside the point, the parable teaches, when it comes to offering a helping and compassionate hand.

Here’s a true story about neighborliness across enormous differences of culture and background.

Huston Smith, scholar of world religions and best-selling author tells of a time he had been in Tanzania for a conference. Following the conference he rented a car... only to discover the hard way that there was not much more gas than necessary to get him out of the lot.

So... he ran out of gas in the middle of the desert – with no one around!

Well, he saw two figures in the distance. Waved to them. They were very tall, regal, Maasai. They spoke no English. Huston Smith does not speak their language.

He used gestures to somehow get his message of need across.

One walked away and the other stayed with Huston.

After some time, ten Maasai returned.

Huston steered. They pushed... for a long time... but talking and laughing with apparent delight all the way... until they arrived at a small outpost where Huston could get gas and the additional help he needed.

Talk about neighbors across huge barriers of culture and language...

The message is of course the same as the message of the parable.

First, strive to *be* the neighbor, to be the one who does not cross the road when we see someone in need of a kind word or helping hand, to be the one who helps, who is present to the suffering of friend or stranger.

Second, put aside our expectations about who are the respectable ones who would be the neighbors in this world of ours – might turn out to be people of very different religious backgrounds or political persuasions or social class from ours. And it doesn't matter.

What does matter *is* the kind word and the helping hand... from whomever it comes... from the neighbor of whatever name, religion, political party, culture.

Well... we all want to be kind, don't we... we all want to be compassionate... we all want to make a difference for the good in the world. (On this Mother's Day we might put it this way: We all want to be the sort of person our mothers would be proud of!)

So... how are we to sustain this sort of good will in the midst of our sometimes too-full, too-busy lives?

Preaching to the choir, as it were, I affirm that nurturing our spiritual lives in the context of religious community is one very good way to live in that direction.

Not everyone agrees; and there are more and more these days who are, as we might put it, allergic to religion – which has indeed, sadly, not always been a force for good in the world.

Long ago, for example, I lost track of how often I've heard the phrase "We are spiritual, but not religious," when meeting with a couple who came to be married at Old Ship... because... well, because they have no affiliation with any other congregation... or have some mixed background... or no religious background at all. And wish to get married at Old Ship because... they like our building... or we are close to their reception venue... or maybe they know just enough about Unitarian Universalism to sense that we would marry just about anyone with any background – "all are welcome" after all, as our sign proclaims.

And you know what? *All* this really is okay with me.

I am sympathetic to these couples wherever they are on their religious and/or spiritual journey. And am pleased to work with them to craft a ceremony that I hope has spiritual depth... in a religious setting.

After all, whatever their protestations about "religion" (look at the hypocrisy, look at the abuse, look at the violence in the name of religion...) they did come to me, a minister, to be married under the auspices of a religious institution in a building that, though we call ours with historical accuracy a meeting house, is for all intents and purposes a church.

In short, maybe many such couples are spiritual *and* religious without realizing it. Maybe you are too.

I certainly consider myself to be both spiritual *and* religious, and I believe our congregations are at their best when they – we – are both spiritual and religious.

We *are*, after all, religious – whether we admit to it or not.

Our congregation belongs to a larger institution we usually call a “denomination.” We hold Sunday morning events each week that most of us call worship services – which hew pretty closely to the ancient form of western worship in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Looks like religion to me.

As for “spiritual” – well, it *is* possible to be “spiritual” or have a spiritual practice without being part of some sort of what we call a religious institution or tradition. But this doesn’t mean that a church or temple or mosque can’t support or enhance our spiritual lives, can’t inspire us and guide us as we grow our souls, strive to live up to our ideals, values, ethical standards... (our mothers hopes and expectations for us!).

In fact, at their imperfect best, this is exactly what religions do, exactly what our congregation does... or strives to do.

For spiritual grounding in a religious community can enhance and support all the ways we seek to be of use in the world – in our personal lives, at work, and as social activists.

You see, like breathing in and breathing out: you won’t survive long only breathing out! Only doing, doing, doing.

And though you *can* and many people do – recharge, renew, restore your energy through solitary spiritual practices such as meditation or reading or walking in the woods, and so on – *together*, well that’s something else.

My experience every Sunday, as you’ve heard me say on other occasions, is that sitting down with a hundred or so others for the purpose of deep reflection on the values we hold dear, on the ideals for which we strive, on how we might shape our lives in the direction of kindness and compassion, on who we most truly are... just by walking in I am reminded that I, that we, are part of one interwoven whole, a fabric of life... – and not just reminded in my head: for by coming together in worship we *experience* non-verbally, even unconsciously, being part of a reality larger than ourselves. Which *is* the truth of the matter, the truth of our lives!

Then, when joys and sorrows are spoken and silently embraced by everyone else, that reminder and experience of interconnection deepens.

And when we sing together, we deepen this experience further, having joined our voices in harmony, our spirits in harmony (“spiritus” means “breath” after all, the breath with which we sing) – so a harmony that echoes the harmony of life.

Then, prayer or meditation – a stillness in which to *feel* this interwoven connectedness, this harmony, this unity of life.

Preaching? At least with the hope that my words further evoke this experience, this deep knowing.

All of which – I’m certain of this – can leave us better prepared to be of service, of use, during the rest of our lives in whatever ways we are called.

And if all this isn’t “spiritual *and* religious” I don’t know what would be.

And if all this isn’t about *love*, I’m not sure I understand what it *is* about; for another way of describing my own experience – maybe yours too – is that on Sunday and at all sorts of other church gatherings (even, sometimes, at their best, committee meetings – actually, maybe also at their apparent worst, as we struggle together in a kind of spiritual crucible to get something practical done while maintaining, even deepening, human relationship and care)... I find myself reconnecting with the source of love by

whatever name, the deep wellsprings, the nameless mystery at the heart of our interwoven life – and therefore energized, enlivened for whatever lies ahead in this surprising journey we call living.

Huston Smith, now in his nineties, has written dozens of books on the religions of the world. He was raised in China, his father a Methodist minister. And over the course of his career as a scholar, professor, and writer, he has practiced in depth, for years at a time, the disciplines of Hindu Vedanta and yoga, Buddhist Zen meditation, the five times daily prayer of Muslims within the Sufi thread of Islam... and at the same time has continued to consider himself a Christian in the Methodist tradition. He affirms the value, to put it another way, of spiritual paths within the context of religious tradition and religious community.

When it comes to the essence of religion, Smith came to the conclusion that we can justifiably throw out the science of the ancient traditions, and we can throw out many of the social teachings and strictures of the ancient traditions, rooted as they were in times and places very different from our own. What then do you have left? Paraphrasing Smith, we have wisdom traditions which can help us to work out our destinies, our lives, meaning and purpose, in relation to how things truly are: within the unity of life, the Kingdom of Heaven, God, Tao, Buddha-nature.

To bring all this home, as Unitarian Universalists we may sometimes think we have to make it all up – our beliefs, our values, and so on.

Well, we don't. The ancient wisdom is there – the Sources of our Living Tradition, which are an essential part of our Unitarian Universalist Principles, affirm the value of these wellsprings from which we can draw, each of us finding meaning and purpose and practices for spiritual growth from one or another of those wellsprings, or some blend of them – world religions, humanist teachings, our individual experiences of transcendence and wonder, and so on.

All held in our particular religious container for our spiritual lives called Unitarian Universalism – that we might better be the neighbor we do indeed wish to be, that we might better love the neighbor, even or especially the neighbor who may seem so different from us.

For we truly are all, as the winnowed wisdom of the human race (in Huston Smith's lovely phrase) has it... part of one family of life:

All of us neighbors.

Spiritual *and* religious: the water of life and a container for the water of life – a container that may sometimes crack, even leak, and water that may sometimes appear clouded, less than perfectly pure... but life-giving, life-sustaining, love-suffused water without which we cannot live, not truly and fully live.

So may it always be.