

Radically Religious
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12:28

Almost every year, there's a Gallup Poll of the most and least religious states in America. The most religious states in 2012 were mostly Southern—Mississippi is the most religious state in the country, followed by Utah, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas. The least religious states were mostly all in New England—Vermont is the least religious state, followed by New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts at number four, and Rhode Island rounding out the top five least religious states in the country.[1]

We live in one of the least religious states in the country—perhaps you don't even notice this if you're from here and you've lived here most of your life. But practicing a religion, any religion for that matter, going to religious services, raising your children in a faith tradition, making meaning in your life through a religion makes you unique—radical even in Massachusetts. Let's look at the whole nation for a second though—40% of Americans labeled themselves as "very religious" last year, 29% said they are "moderately religious," and 31% said they are not religious at all.[2]

So we live in the fourth least religious state in America, a nation where nearly 1 in 3 people say they are not religious at all. But we're here today in church; we're making an effort, doing our best. Should it phase us that some folks in our community may think that we're a little nuts for spending a Sunday morning in a pew and eating delicious spaghetti made by junior and senior high school students after church and not drinking coffee and listening to NPR right now or going for a run or whatever? I can't answer that for you, though you better say that spaghetti is delicious. I'll bet you never really considered that we're pretty radical around these parts—going to church, making meaning in your life through religion—not just spirituality, but religion, that's significant in modernity in Massachusetts.

Now today being Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian Church, I can't help but celebrate what we're doing here this morning. UCC Minister Lillian Daniel's recent book on this subject is *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*. Daniel gets pretty feisty, just one of many reasons why I appreciate her so much. She talks about her dread on airplanes when people ask her what she does, she says she's a minister, and then her fellow passenger condescendingly explains to her everything that's wrong with organized religion and why they're "spiritual but not religious." It's happened to me too and most ministers I know.

She says, "Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails . . . and did I mention the beach at sunset yet? Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building . . . Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me." [3]

Sound too harsh or bitter? My own sister tends to label herself as "spiritual but not religious" as I'm sure some of your family members or friends may as well. Spiritual but not religious folks aren't bad people—if their private spirituality somehow makes them better or kinder or helpful in the world, good for them. Is it enough though? Is it enough to be spiritual but practice your individual form of spirituality in isolation from a larger community that is there to both support you and hold you accountable?

I think what's at stake here is profound in our society where rampant individualism is just how we operate. Don't you hear attitudes like I only care about myself and my family and whatever happens to you and your family is not my problem. My spirituality is just that, mine. And I'm only interested, even when I do grace your church with my presence, of having my own individual needs met. You—the pastor, the staff, the programs you offer, the whole congregation, are solely responsible for feeding and nourishing me. I realize this is strange to say on a Sunday where we will literally be getting nourished after worship, but you know what I mean. You know the attitude I'm referring to, and you may have moments of being that way yourself. I certainly have my moments of unhealthy individualism too.

So how do we combat this disturbing trend of rampant individualism in our society? Well, dare I say that we can get a little bit of help from practicing religion together in community, which is what we see in our Pentecost story today? Following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples have some sort of amazing religious experience, maybe it was simply and profoundly a kindling of the Holy Spirit deep within themselves to realize that their mission was just beginning. The disciples could have had that private religious experience among themselves and when others came to investigate, they could have brushed the commotion aside and moved on with their private spiritualities. But they don't, and that's the key.

The turning point of the story is when Peter figuratively and literally stands up to address the crowd, and he speaks his mind with conviction and truth and love. The lectionary cuts off the rest of Peter's speech but he nears the end by saying to the crowds, "Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." [4] And that day three thousand people are baptized—they commit themselves to the teachings of Jesus, and a new life of prayer and commitment to this new community of Christ followers. That's how the story goes, and the turning point is Peter taking a personal religious experience and witnessing to the crowds—going forth and telling what happened and how he encountered God in the person of Jesus Christ. It was Peter's testimony that made the difference.

When Lillian Daniel reflects on testimony she says, "Many quietly faithful people struggle with testimony. We don't want to shove our faith down people's throats. We don't want to be pushy, obnoxious, or self-righteous . . . [But] Testimony is calling out that you have seen light in the midst of darkness. Testimony is telling the story about how you met God, even when you have forgotten it. Testimony is telling the story of a community over time, of a particular people, and how God intervened. And when the unchurched call us into the most intimate and sad moments, we become the church. We can either sit mute or give our testimony." [5]

Just this past week I experienced the power of community and testimony and frankly why I love my religion and the way it's practiced in the United Church of Christ. On Tuesday I went to an Ecclesiastical Council for the Metropolitan Boston Association of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ that was held at my former church in Wellesley. I knew the candidate who would be defending his Ordination Paper, and the secretary of my former church had called to see if I could come—they were nervous about having a quorum.

After his presentation, everyone from my former church was dismissed from the room, including the candidate. The rest of us, who represented the various churches in the MBA, were left to discuss his Ordination paper, his presentation, and vote on whether or not to allow him to seek an ordainable call in the United Church of Christ. Sort-of a big deal, and I'm so glad that I don't have to do that ever again.

My best friend from seminary and I were the youngest people in the room by decades, and it was fascinating to hear reactions from lay members and 2 or 3 retired UCC ministers. I heard from some of them, that most young ministers seem to have issues thinking about God's wrath

and judgment. I heard thoughtful theological reflections on sin and evil and the aftermath of World War II, and how what every generation experiences shapes one's worldview. The discussion ended up being this profound moment of the Church at its best—of testimony and people saying where they've been and what they believe while also respecting where others are and what they believe. The candidate did get approved for Ordination Pending a Call, and the night ended with church people doing what church people often do best—eating cookies, drinking punch, and celebrating.

My friends, you are radical to be here this morning worshipping God in a church in one of the least religious states in the country. You are unique in finding meaning in your life, not just in sunsets and long walks on the beach, but making time today to worship God, not in isolation and hopefully not making this morning just about you and your needs. And there may come a time when someone asks to hear your story or you know you are called to tell it—your testimony of the light you see in the darkness, of how you met God in your life. We all have stories to tell, and I hope that you will. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Billy Hallowell, "Gallup: These are the 10 Most (and Least) Religious States in America," The Blaze, February 14, 2013 <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/02/14/gallup-these-are-the-10-most-and-least-religious-states-in-america/>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Lillian Daniel, When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church, 127-128.

[4] Acts 2:38, The Message.

[5] Lillian Daniel, When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough, 21.