Sermon Series: Both / And - “Sacred & Secular”

Acts 10:1-22

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Worship Question: How do you define what is secular? How do you define what is sacred?

Jen and I lived in Virginia for a few months after we were married. While we were down there we got hooked in with a group called Young Life helping as volunteer leaders. The church we were a part of took over a local coffee shop once a week and hundreds of kids would show up as we sang songs, played games, prayed, and heard scripture and a brief devotional. It was interesting because the whole purpose of these events were to meet the kids where they were to give them a somewhat neutral location to experience the love of God in meaningful ways. I mean sure, it got a little crazy as we taped bags of candy to couch cushions which we then tied around an adult volunteer who we then hoisted into the air by a rope thrown over a rafter to use as a human piñata and hit with a whiffle ball bat. (I did get rope burns on my hands by holding him up there.) But there was always an underlying theme of God’s love that ran throughout each night.

One thing that I found really surprising was the music selections that were chosen. Many of these kids were unchurched so they didn’t know even the most popular worship songs of the time. And so what we would call “secular songs” would be used. And it is amazing how God could still be found in those songs. While I forget most of them (20 years later) one song Jen and I remember using was “Lean on me.” The kids all knew it. And the chorus goes, “Lean on me, when you're not strong, And I'll be your friend. I’ll help you carry on. For it won't be long 'Til I'm gonna need Somebody to lean on.” And after the song was sung the leader would connect it with something Biblical - talking about how Jesus is someone we can always lean on for support and connecting much of the song with how we are to act as Christians.

Some people get appalled by this - using something that is not biblically based and yet connecting it with Christianity. We often classify this difference with the terms sacred and secular. Sacred: things that are purposefully holy, honored, or revered which represent our faith or our God. Secular: things that are worldly or not specifically religious or connected with God. But here’s the thing, we can’t put God in a box. And it is possible to use things that are not explicitly religious by nature to help get the point across and share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. In fact Jesus did this all the time. “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed” or “like a little bit of leaven.” Or “if one of you had a donkey and it fell into a well on a Sabbath…”

We often try to make distinctions between what is sacred and what is secular in this world - places where we expect and accept God to show up and places where we don’t. But God reaches into all areas of life, leading us to live with compassion and grace no matter the time or place. God can use anything to share and explain God’s love with people.

Our scripture today from Acts 10 shows that the lines between sacred and secular are not as clear cut as we think they may or should be. If you ever read the Bible you will often see a dichotomy present between Jew and Gentile. As the Old Testament was written as part of the Jewish culture and religion and Christianity came out of that Jewish faith, we will often see this comparison. You were either Jewish or you were not. And so everyone not Jewish was lumped into the category of Gentile

And these two did not mix very well.

The Jewish culture had very strict customs and law because they tried to keep themselves pure and holy. At God’s instructions they set themselves aside to be different from the world. And so they followed those instructions as best they could. Peter was a good Jew. He followed the laws as best as he could. But things were changing. Jesus had come and given the people a new way to get to God. Not just the Jewish people had access to God through the laws they kept, but now God’s love was purposefully expressed to all people through Jesus Christ.

But even so, it was still difficult in those early years for many to see that God could welcome people who were not Jewish into what was becoming the Christian faith. In fact there was a huge push for people to first become Jewish in order to become Christian. It was seen almost as a prerequisite. Acts 10 shows a bit of a tipping point, especially for Peter. Cornelius - a centurion in the Italian Regiment - was devout and God-fearing. He prayed regularly. He gave generously to those in need. He was a good man and tried to follow God as best he could. One day an angel told him to send for Peter. Now again, here’s the thing, Peter was very much stuck in the Jewish mindset that Jews and Gentiles did not mix well. And as Cornelius’ guards were on their way to see Peter God began softening Peter’s heart to accept this changing dynamic. And God started with something simple.

I think I ask this question a lot, but how many of you like to eat? As we get older, I know many of us may have some restriction on what we eat. We need to watch our salt or sugar intake. Some have allergies or sensitivities. I know there are certain cheeses I cannot eat without getting a migraine within minutes. But for the Jewish people there were foods they could not touch with a 10-foot pole. Because it was against their culture, their religion, their way of life.

But things were different now. Jesus came to bring people back to God - all people back to God. There was to be no distinction to differentiate between who was welcome into God’s kingdom and who was not because all were invited. And so God gave Peter a vision to start the process. Peter was famished and God showed him this huge sheet coming down from heaven with all sorts of animal - mostly of things that were forbidden to eat. And yet an angel directed Peter to kill and eat. Again, they wouldn’t have even touched the stuff, let alone eat it. And Peter stated this fact in verse 14. “‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’” Three times this happens and then Peter starts to get it.

At that point the men sent by Cornelius arrived. And to kind of tie up the story, Peter was able to listen to the men and travel back with them to Caesarea to speak with Cornelius. He flat out told him, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?” (v. 28-29).

And as a result of this interaction, the Holy Spirit descended on Cornelius and all who were with him and they started speaking in tongues. The Jews with Peter were astonished as they saw these Gentiles speaking in tongues and praising God. And those in Cornelius’s household were baptized.

It’s interesting to see these early Christians wrestle with this understanding. Peter states in verse 34-35, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” In the next chapter we see Peter catching flack for this. He went back to Jerusalem and was criticized for going into the home of a Gentile and eating with him and his family. Peter then had to defend his actions. And finally the church realized that God was welcoming people into the kingdom who were not like them. Acts 11:18 states, “When they heard [Peter’s recount of the story], they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

It took God softening Peter’s heart - Peter actually listening to what God was saying and then having the courage and determination to defend what took place - before the rest of the church elders in order for this change to happen and to see that God can be found outside the sacred walls of religion and in the secular world.

Sadly, we still deal with this type of issue today. I saw an article online about missionaries traveling to Papua New Guinea trying to translate the Bible for the indigenous people there. The people there had no word for lamb nor any concept of what that would be because sheep were not introduced to the island until the 19th century. And so the missionaries had a dilemma on how to translate what it means that Jesus is the Lamb of God. Some proposed to translate it as the pig of God because in their society there were pigs that were raised to eat and some that were raised for sacrifice. The pigs raised for sacrifice were to be perfect and unblemished and were sometimes even seen as pets or part of the family. And so that would be a more direct translation of the meaning of the Lamb of God - one the native people would actually understand.

Now some argue that the translation never actually was printed to describe Jesus as the pig of God. There are some that argue that it did happen that way. I do not know if it did or not. But either way, as I read the article I looked at the comments on the article itself and people were bashing the author saying that the author was being untrue and even calling the reported act (true or not) as being vile and detestable.

Please hear me on this, I believe in the word of God. It is God’s message for us. And we do not have the liberty to change what God is trying to tell us and communicate to us. However, the original text was written for a specific time and a specific place and we have to understand that as we apply it to our lives today. We also have to realize that we have translations from translations which may not always convey the intended message as well as God intended for it to be communicated in the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. And so we actually need to study what the Bible says. We have to dive in to realize what God is telling us. Because if we do not and we took everything at surface value, we should all have a wall or a railing around the roof of our homes and Red Lobster would be out of business because we wouldn’t be able to eat the food. But I digress…

Regardless if you think the Lamb of God could be translated as the pig of God in some cultures or not, the way we treat one another over differences of opinions is not acceptable. (And I apologize for being a little “tongue in cheek” here.) Heaven forbid we accept the fact that God can work through something that is not specifically word for word accurate to our translations of the Bible to communicate that someone is loved by God. Heaven forbid we use a story or anecdote - or dare I say a parable - to communicate a larger or more complete understanding of God. Heaven forbid we welcome someone into our church that may not have the exact same faith that we do, or way of life, or appearance, or dress style, or behaviors, or any other difference. Heaven forbid we recognize that God might be working and moving in the secular world. How else are people in the secular world going to see God?

Again, we should not try to put God in a box. But sadly we do. We claim that we have the only truth about God and that God operates in a specific way and God cannot or does not operate any differently. Why do you think we have so many different denominations? Because we cannot all agree on how God operates and how our faith and religion is supposed to be carried out in this world. And so while we argue and fight over what color the carpet needs to be, or what is the proper way to baptize someone, or if we should have religious symbols in our places of worship or not, or how we should be structured as a denomination, or just how much Christ there is in the bread and the juice we use for communion, we start to fracture and lose sight of the real purpose. That God is God and God should be worshiped as such. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and God himself - along with the Holy Spirit - all part of the Triune God. Our focus should be on worshiping God as our creator, following Jesus as the expression of God’s love, and empowered by the Holy Spirit - go out into this world - outside of the sacred - in order to reach those who are lost. Because regardless of how long you may have been a Christian, there was a point in your life when you were not. And if someone didn’t reach out to you - you wouldn’t be here right now.

Now I don’t want you to think we can throw out the sacred because God can be found in the secular. We need to be purposeful at setting aside time and space to focus on God. We need to worship and do so corporately. That is why the Church was created. We need to spend time purposefully in prayer, Bible study, and so many of the other spiritual disciplines to draw closer to God. We need to carve out time in our schedules and make spaces that we can use as sacred to God.

But I am also saying we cannot disregard things that are not specifically sacred because we do not expect God to show up there. Because God will show up wherever God chooses to show up. God will work however God wants to work. And if that means God using something that we may see as…different…or simply not congruent with what we think, feel, or believe - who are we to say otherwise? Who are we to determine if something is unusable by God or not? Who are we to say that someone is unwelcome in this sacred space because they do not fit our ideal mold?

It was a little obvious over the summer when I don’t wear robes in worship and when people see me outside of worship, but I have tattoos. I started getting them when I was 30 and I remember my mother crying after I got my first one. My first tattoo was that of a burning bush. With 3 roots to describe my faith rooted in the trinity, 12 branches for the 12 disciples, 40 leaves for trials and testing, and 7 flames for God’s perfection. One of the flames is split off into 2 making 8 - or a new creation. All of these numbers, including the plant itself, has biblical significance. I even have Psalm 25:4-5 literally written on my arm. “Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.” All of my tattoos are related to my faith except for one. And when my tattoos were first visible - I had only one person quote to me 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” And I responded, “some people like to decorate the walls.”

But I cannot tell you how many times I have shared my faith through my tattoos. I know for a fact that I used them to literally talk someone down from taking their own life until help arrived. And I don’t know how many times the guy who tattoos me calls me to have theological discussions with me and the people he has sitting in his chair at the time. And so while some may frown upon my tattoos, God’s love has been expressed through them.

We cannot put God in a box. We cannot deny the possibility that God can be present in something unexpected. We cannot presume that God cannot work in things that are not necessarily religious by nature or different from our expectations. And while God often moves outside of our boxes, and Jesus calls us to follow him, where do you think we need to go? We need help take God out of this sacred space into the secular. We need to live out our faith in every facet of our lives. We need to express God’s love for all people - to all people - in all places.

And yes, there are some standards that we need to hold on to for ourselves, but we cannot condemn anyone for not holding up to those standards. We cannot condemn people for not following Christ because maybe they don’t even know who Christ is. If we shut down every person who is not like us and refused to show them God’s love, how will they ever know that love for themselves?

This world is so full of hate right now. Social media is practically nothing but fighting any more. I’m even seeing it tearing families apart. Why can’t we start to change this world in love? Why can’t we insight conversations fueled by love instead of hate? Why can’t we take God into this world with us? And to be honest, God is already there we just don’t always see it.

God is working in this world. Our goal is to be a part of what God is doing, wherever God is doing it. And so I encourage you to look for where God is already moving and jump in to help. Look for where you cannot see God moving and fill in the gap to help make God’s love known. And as a church, I pray that all we do, we do in the love of God - especially as we help to transform ALL lives in the love of Jesus Christ.