

Religion Can Be a Monkey on Your Back

Text: Romans 14:23; Isaiah 46:4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It's been suggested to me that there are those of you who keep wondering what's happening in the saga of Christ Community and the Classis of Muskegon - let me just say that on Tuesday evening there is to be a meeting of the Classis of Muskegon, and it would appear that the separation document which has been prepared will be passed. That seems to be the opinion. We're not lighting off the firecrackers yet, but nonetheless it would seem that we should soon be beyond this nightmare of the soul. It looks very favorable for us, and as if all things that we had hoped for would be in place, plus we would be in touch with the national offices of the Reformed Church in the next five years in a continuing conversation, which I think is also a positive thing. You'll probably get the press reports before I could tell you again, but if that is the case, we will have a brief meeting next week following the ten o'clock service.

Well, all of that is about religion, and religion can really be rotten. Religion can be a monkey on your back. Religion can be one of the most depressing, dispiriting, draining, oppressive, manipulative, coercive, negative forces in the world. That's quite a confession for a preacher.

When I was young and growing up, thinking about becoming a minister, I was worried whether or not God would last, whether or not God could be adequately defended, whether or not people would continue to practice religion. I guess I was worried that I might get to this point in my life and be out of work. But, as a matter of fact, I have come to conclude at this advanced age that the religious human animal is alive and well on Planet Earth and that religion is endemic to the human person, that there is something within the human being that will always make that person reach out in some fashion for something or someone who is beyond, some transcendent realm, some Beyond, some person, force - whatever it may be - there is something within us that can only be filled with a connection with something that is beyond us. Here in the Church, we speak of God, and when we speak of God, we speak of the God Whom we've seen in the face of Jesus Christ, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ.

But, I'm talking about religion more broadly this morning. It's not just the Christian religion; it is religion as a phenomenon that I want to think about with you this morning. I have been thinking about it a lot in these past weeks and months - Religion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he was in the darkness of the Second World War, incarcerated for his conspiracy against the life of Hitler, wrote his *Letters and Papers From Prison*, in which he plays with that idea a lot and he talks about what form would a religionless Christianity be. He recognized that religious practice can become religiosity, and he recognized that in the modern period, after a couple of hundred years of the development of the human sciences, that God was being edged out of the world, and so he talked about "Man come of age." Now, that statement became almost a model for the post-war decades, but it just shows how contextual our thinking is, mine included. But, any good preaching or any good expression of the word of God needs to be the word for that moment and that context, and so I'm not faulting Bonhoeffer for, in the depths of the darkness of the 20th century, speaking about man coming of age and God being edged out of the world. As a matter of fact, fifty years later, religion is alive and well, and while some of the traditional religious trappings have gone by the way, we find that we live in a day when there is a conservative religious reaction on the one hand and then, on the other hand, there is the New Age manifestation of a spiritual hunger within.

A couple of weeks ago I used a few statements which we typed up in the bulletin insert last week - Carl Jung's statement that in his practice of psychoanalysis there was not a case of people in the last half of their life that he could not trace back to their lack of meaning, and that lack of meaning was the consequence of the failure of any religious mechanism, religious ritual, religious practice, which ritual and practice was the means by which the person is put in touch with that which is beyond. And some of the statements about the youth, the younger generation that have been led into self-destructive behaviors and addictions and even violence because they have no frame of reference, no rooting in a religious tradition that is able to mediate to them that which is beyond them.

I'm reminded of Hendrikus Berkhof, my old mentor, who once said, over against the youth of his day a couple of decades ago, that in The Netherlands, in Europe generally, he couldn't talk to that generation about Christian faith because they had absolutely no basis on which to make connection, and he said they're not the prodigals, they are the children of the prodigals, you see? The prodigal son left home and knew that there was a home and there was a father and, as we'll see in the next couple of weeks, he eventually went home.

But, if the prodigal has children in the far country, the children don't even know there's a home. So, how do you begin even to engage in that discussion which can lead to a religious practice that is positive and that becomes a means for relating the individual to God, to that which is beyond? Because, if it is true that to be

human is to have a hole in us that can be filled only by God, then we, being human, will be in trouble if we have no place in which to rest our souls, if we have no mechanism, no means, no space, no place, no community in which to experience that connection – not that that connection cannot be and is not sustained and ought not to be sustained in our own personal and private lives, in our moments of solitude and so on. But those moments alone and those moments of solitude, I believe, are cultivated, are experienced only if we have been given some kind of frame of reference and if we are connected with community that corporately comes into the presence and acknowledges that presence - indeed, that worships, that occasionally is lost in wonder, love and praise.

So, to begin with, I would simply say that I think religion is a potentially very positive and necessary part of human experience. Have you ever thought of giving it up? Have you ever thought of just chucking it? Have you ever wondered if you will keep at it? Or, have you taken a long sabbatical and maybe you've come back?

I think if we think, if we're honest about our human experience and our religious experience, then probably there are those times when you say, "Hmm, Sunday morning again. *The Chicago Tribune* and a cup of coffee doesn't sound too bad. I mean, to have to shave and shower and show up...."

Religion can be burdensome, it can be heavy. The prophet recognized that: Second Isaiah, the one who was prophesying in the sixth century before the Common Era. The reading that I did was a kind of mocking piece - "Bel bows down. Nebo stoops." These were the top gods of the Babylonian pantheon. And Babylon ruled the world - magnificent city of Babylon, the Babylonian Empire, the forces of which came in and decimated Jerusalem and brought the Jews into exile. And in that day it was just the conventional wisdom, the common understanding, that the winners must be in touch with the most powerful gods. And so, these Jews, rather dispirited, away from their own land living as exiles, said, "Well, the gods of Babylon must be it."

But, the prophet of Yahweh, the God of Israel, had another vision of things. He could see that Babylon had its day. But, Babylon would soon cease to be, for on the horizon was Persia, and the Jews had all experienced on the New Year's Day celebrations how the Babylonians would take their chief gods and load them on floats and have their own little Coast Guard Festival, you know? The gods would parade through the city and people would bow down and throw flowers - "These are your gods, O Babylon."

But now, the enemy's at the gate. Now there's panic in Babylon. Now they run to the temple, grab those statues and haul them out and put them on beasts of burden and sort of balance them precariously as they try to get out of town with their gods. So, the prophet of Israel said, "Look, the gods are going into captivity!"

A little humor there. They're dragging their nose in the dust as they're being dragged along by the oxen and the people are trying to save their gods. Now, that's an irony, isn't it? People have to save their gods. And the prophet says to the Jews that they're going to go home; he's announcing the salvation that God's about to bring. But he can't do it without this little aside, this little mocking picture of the gods of Babylon who cannot save, but need to be saved, who cannot bear, but need to be borne, who are not the God who lifts the burden, but who are gods that become a burden.

I'm using that image this morning just to say to you that religion has a shadow side, and that religious practice, which at its best can lift and inspire and heal, can in the expression of its shadow side, become coercive and manipulative and become an end in itself, and it can become a burden, rather than a burden-bearer.

We may not do as the prophet went on to say, we may not take some wood and some gold and some precious stones and fashion ourselves an idol and then fall down before it. But, let us not be deceived. Our religious practice also, in the Christian Church and really in all of the religions, can become an end in itself rather than being a mediating agency by which the grace and the peace of God are brought to people. Bad religion is one of the most destructive and potentially dangerous powers in our world, and I would have to say after all of my years of ministry, even though most of my contacts have been with Christian people in the church, I have to say in all honesty to you, I have seen people as damaged by religion as helped by religion. And I run into people all the time who have given up, have given up on the Church and given up on religious practice because of some hurtful, painful experience or some disillusionment with the exercise of religion in its institutional form.

And I want us to think about that clearly this morning, because I want us to recognize that if we will be an authentic institution of religion, we must practice it so that its positive power is uplifting and inspiring, helping and healing people and not manipulative and controlling and destructive of the human spirit. You know what I'm talking about this morning? I'm talking about a God, the God of heaven and earth, the God Who is beyond us, the God Who is beyond our wildest dreams or our ability even to contemplate, the God Who has been revealed to us, the God Whose heart we see in the face of Jesus, but the God that we cannot pull down and domesticate in order that we might manage.

But, do you see that that's the danger of religion, that we get a human form and a human ritual and the human institution and then we make it absolute? We identify it with the Absolute as though what we have in our religious view and the practices of our religious exercise, are identical with God, God's self, and then we become coercive and manipulative with that religious experience. What I'm trying to say this morning is that we may be incurably, inevitably religious. But, if we fail to see that religion is a human product, and if we absolutize it as though

it's divine, then we become dangerous people, and then our religion becomes something that's oppressive.

Where did we ever miss the boat, anyway? Why can't we hear the word of God as it was read this morning, after mocking the gods Bel and Nebo who are being dragged through the dust out of the city in order to be rescued, in order to be saved? Why have we not heard Who God really is? "Listen, O House of Jacob, all the remnant of the House of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth. I have borne you, carried from the womb, even to your old age, I am God. Even when you turn gray, I will carry you. I will carry. I will save."

Five times over, I is repeated - I, I am the One, I will carry, I have made, I will bear, I will carry and will save. You see, religion that is good, that is positive, that is true, is religion that will say to people, "You are loved by God. You are being borne by God. You don't have to rescue God; you don't have to worry about God. You don't have to get panicky and in a frenzy about all of your religious exercise and all of your religious duties, so that sometimes you'd just like to kick it all over, you'd like to leave it all, you get weary of it."

Don't we get weary of it? We have to support everything. We have to support the PTA and Easter Seals and the Church! We have to support the youth group and the Worship Center and we've got to keep worship alive. What if I don't come today? What if everybody decided not to come today? There wouldn't be anyone there. Poor Dick would stand on his stool all by himself.

All of that heavy duty and obligation, all of that "ought" and "should", all of that "must", all of that musty religion that becomes oppressive and burdensome. I'd give it up, too, if I believed that that's what it was about.

But, how do we miss the word of God? "I am He, even when you turn gray, I'll carry you. I made, I bear, I carry, I save."

We get so hung up with our religion. Paul had to struggle when he wrote to the Church of Rome. He said, "Some of you keep one day, some of you keep another, some of you eat vegetables, some of you eat tenderloin. For goodness sakes, what does it matter? Why don't you just do what you do out of faith? Why don't you do what you do out of conviction? Why don't you be a person that lives out of your own center rather than by some template that's placed on you? Why don't you live out of faith, out of trust, why don't you be who you are and all the time know that, whether you live, you live unto the Lord, and whether you die, you die unto the Lord. So, whether you live or whether you die, you are the Lord's."

Why hasn't the Church let people know that God is the One in Whom they live and move and have their being? Why have we threatened and condemned, judged and cast out? Why haven't we said to people, "Rest in the Lord"? Practice the sacrament of baptism, because in that beautiful moment, we are helped to know

that that child, a gift of God's love, is connected. We're connected. The water isn't magic.

Elliot Brown was loved before church this morning as much as he'll be loved after church this morning. Can't we see the value and the beauty and the wonder of this sacrament without us getting into a great panic because some child failed to get baptized? We break bread and we take the cup and we experience in that moment a ritual action because it's filled with tradition and it's history and it becomes for us a moment of connection.

But, would I be disconnected if I never took bread and never took cup? I wish we worshiped seven days a week. I'd make about six of them. I love it! I love it! The organ begins. Something happens to me. I need this place; I love this place. But, if I could never worship again, would I be less loved of God?

For God's sake, no. Religion, when it becomes duty, when it becomes obligation, when it becomes coercive and manipulative, when it instills guilt and claims it alone can open the door of heaven - then religion has gone awry, then religion is rotten. Then it's a monkey on your back; you ought to take a sabbatical for a while, until you get good and hungry, until you can't stand it any longer. Then you come and eat bread and drink wine and let water flow down, and then, then you relax and you listen to the word of God who says, "From the womb, I have borne you. I will carry you. I will bear you up. I will save."

Go out and tell your neighbors how good it is when religion is good, because a lot of them aren't here because they got a taste of it when it was bad. And when it's a monkey on your back, it's a disgrace to the Eternal God Who created us, Who keeps us, and Who will never let us go.