

Religion: Has It a Future?

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Scripture: Romans 7:14-25; Mark 8:11-21

Dr. Duncan Littlefair
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

(Mr. Rhem)

It is for me a very great pleasure and privilege to introduce to the congregation of Christ Community and our friends visiting with us today the Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair. My friendship with Dr. Littlefair goes back over a couple of years through one of those wonderful providences when a friend of his became a friend of mine, and we found ourselves on Tuesdays enjoying table fellowship and absolutely wonderful conversation. We meet on Tuesdays religiously. During the past couple of years in which we have been through some difficult waters, it has been a source of great encouragement to me to come to know Dr. Littlefair. His strength and his vision have steeled my purpose. As I said to the 8:30 congregation, when I reflected at the lunch table about the things we were dealing with, Dr. Littlefair told me that they had handled that 100 years ago at Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids and, when I came with some brave new insight, I found out that he had published it in a primer on religion 50 years ago. I don't know why some of us are so Johnny-come-lately, slow to learn, if not slow to speak. As we gathered around that lunch table, it was obvious to me that there was fire in the belly, there was a sermon brewing, ready to be delivered, and so I broached the subject, asking Dr. Littlefair if he would be our guest at Christ Community. He has been in our worship and warmly affirmed us, but he goes a step further in giving us the gift this morning of his presence in this pulpit. I want to say to you very sincerely that I am deeply moved and greatly appreciative of his presence here this morning. Welcome, Dr. Duncan Littlefair.

(Dr. Littlefair)

You cannot be human without being religious. You may doubt that in the course of my presentation to you this morning, but I want it to be in your mind. You cannot be human without being religious.

Now, there are very many levels of humanity, and there are equally many levels of religion. You can have a profound religion. You can have a trivial religion. You

can have an intellectual understanding religion. You can have an ignorant religion. You can have a religion that is equal to the best of knowledge, or you can have a religion that is full of superstition, but religious you must be if you're going to be human. Or, I like it better the other way, to be human means to be religious. There has never, ever been a people anywhere in the history of this globe (and that history goes back a long, long way now; we've extended it enormously), never any people without a religion. Isn't it, then, more than just a little absurd that any one religion should claim that it is the only way? If you stop to think about it, can you imagine anything more absurd than for one religious people to proclaim that its way of reverencing and worshiping this Creative Source that makes us is the only way? And Christians have done that all these centuries. They're still doing it! Criticizing this church because it moves out to the possibility - that's all you're doing - move out to the possibility that there are other ways. I cannot *contain* myself when I hear such stupidity and prejudice as to assume that there is no other way but your own.

And as a result, Muslim faith grew out of Christianity and Judaism, you know. Of course you know. And, Islam faith claims that it's the only valid way and scorns the Christian, or the Christian scorns the Muslim and the Buddhist. And I've been prophesying for some ten years and I think that it will come to be that any crisis that occurs in this world will be a crisis between these two faiths proclaiming themselves to be absolute and the only way. And they are meeting. As Colette made mention in her prayer, they are meeting across the world and they are fighting each other. They will engage in mortal conflict. The tenth and eleventh centuries all over again, and this is the twentieth, moving into the twenty-first. I know of no institution in the world that is as riddled and ridden by superstition as religion.

Now, I want to make the definition of religion. I have said that it was a universal product, that there was never a person or a people without it, never a people, and that's historically true, archeologically, anthropologically true, but I'm going to define religion for you and follow my definition in the course of my discussion because it doesn't run counter to what I've said, it's a definition and a description of it. *Religion is to care*. That's all. To care.

Care about what? I think anything. Anything. We start off with our children. We encourage their caring on their level, whatever it is. Care for money? Fine. Then it will be your religion. It is the religion of many people. Stupid. Trivial, insubstantial, insufficient. But, it can be a religion. But, if we start out with religion as caring, see, then you come to a place like this, this beautiful place, and you join yourself together with other people like you, beautiful congregation in this building. I've been here, I've seen you and felt you. You come to a place like this, you see, to deepen your caring. To illumine your caring. Enlighten it. Make it more profound. Make it more impressive and make a greater impact with it on yourself, and let the chips fall where they may, because you have a society of persons who care, you'll have a caring society.

Now, I want to mention that I think we are in a cultural crisis in the world. A cultural crisis is not something that occurs in a lifetime, not a few years or months, you know. It's a long, long thing. Our cultural crisis has been brewing for 350 years, maybe 400, we don't argue about 50 or 100 years in this sort of thing. It started with the beginning of the scientific approach to knowledge. Not until the 1500s, Galileo the middle of the 16th century, 1500s, the beginning of the scientific approach to the world, not to go on here say, not to go on folklore, not to go on imagination, not to go on superstition, not to go on campfire ideas, but to begin to probe the nature of the world to see what it's like, what it's truly like. Not until the middle of the 16th century.

It wasn't until the middle of the 17th century, which Whitehead calls the century of genius, that we even discovered the circulation of the blood. And that was the same century that Newton discovered the nature of gravity. And since then we've been growing so wonderfully in our ideas and appreciations so that now, after 350 years, it's beginning to take account. It hasn't taken hold yet. People feel it, but intellectually it's not clear. And even our leaders are not talking about it enough because it's a frightening thing and they don't want to offend people. They don't want to frighten them, but they *are* frightened. The people of the western hemisphere are *frightened*, and rightly so, because we're discovering that we live in a world that can brush us aside like any of the thousands of species that have been brushed aside, failed and lost out in the past, that can happen to us, too. We're not that long established, you know.

I like to point out that the human life has been here maybe a million years and the dinosaurs were here *100 million years*. Now, if you understand the nature of scientific progression of knowledge and facts, then that has to be significant to you. And the cultural crisis is that we have to come to the conclusion that things are in our hands. Oh, I know that I violate most of the ritual that goes on around, even in this enlightened church, and some of the ritual that goes on in my church, but we have to come to the conclusion that *we are on our own in this world!* I don't know how any intelligent person could avoid coming to that conclusion, I just do not understand it. There is to be no divine intervention! There is no miraculous intercession. Hasn't been. Is not now, and never will be.

I like the little story in the New Testament, which is a very important book to me, of Jesus in the midst of a circus, a parade. The man stood up in a tree so that he could participate in it, and Jesus said, "Come on down. Come on down, Zaccheaus, and get out of that tree. We've got things to do." *We've got things to do*. Did you hear Colette's prayer? I have difficulty hearing behind there, but I heard it. We have to save our environment. We have to save the air. We have to save the water and make it open and accessible for quality and human living. We have to save our woods. We have to deal with our hatreds, with our tribal loyalties and devotions. We have to deal with our selfishness. We have to deal with our ignorance. We have to deal with our hatred, which leads people to fight against each other, killing neighbors year after year. No matter what we do, we cannot

stop it. This is a cultural crisis and religion is so far showing its awareness of it by its frantic, absolutely frantic retreat into what I call "warehouse religion," emotional binges without the slightest degree of interest in pursuing knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Just emotional expression.

Now I want to say, after having indicated that the cultural crisis is hinged on knowledge, that this kind of knowledge has really nothing to do with religion. I have a principle that I introduced to the men at lunch and I jokingly call it "The Littlefair Principle." I thought I might as well, nobody else has said it.

To the degree that any religion depends upon the repudiation of knowledge and truth and facts, it is to that degree of dependence spiritually ignorant, illiterate, and unworthy.

Now, the alternative:

To the degree that any religion is founded upon and dependent upon knowledge of the world, it is to that degree, spiritually invalid.

I have not excluded religion, now, because religion is to care. But, if your caring involves you repudiating the best and most established knowledge, it's obviously unworthy, too trivial for any people to adhere to. But, if you make a religion out of the facts, you're missing the whole point of a religion, which is *to care*.

Now, we do not allow the religionists to tell us what the facts are. That would be ridiculous. They're not trained to do it, obviously, are they? You want to know about the earth, what it's made of? You want to know its structure, you go to the geologist, don't you? They know. They have learned. They've applied the scientific method. They have irrefutable facts, not some dream that arose around a campfire about what the nature of the earth was. No way.

You want to know about the human body? You go to a biologist. And let me tell you that I've heard from the biologists that if you don't know the biology of the last 20 years, you're ignorant, biologically speaking, so great has been the advance and growth and knowledge of the body. But, you don't ask a religionist about the nature of the body.

You want to know about the structure of things like this? And the rocks and some trees? You don't go to the geologist, you go to the physicist and the chemist. He'll tell you.

You want to know about the history of life on this planet? You go to the anthropologist. They're the ones who have been doing the studying on this thing, and they know. They're not guessing, they're not hoping. They have *facts*, and those facts are important for anybody trying to live the modern world so that you can make your caring an intelligent thing.

One other point: We're on the stage of the democratization of religion. I've been wondering about this for some time and it suddenly occurred to me that what I've been after all these years in my ministry is the democratization of religion. Isn't it amazing that we make God a monarch? Have you thought about that? We make God a monarch. *We don't believe in monarchies!* Goodness sakes, we abolished them long, long ago! Even Japan. Certainly the monarchy in England, Britain, the one outstanding one is just decorative, it's not the essence of the British Republic. We don't talk about monarchs, but we make God to be sitting on a throne. We have people supplicating Him, fawning over Him, flattering Him. Most of our prayers are forms of flattery equivalent to a courtier and an emperor. God is not Louis XIV. Surely that ought to be clear to us. Degradation. Can you see Jesus on a throne? Can you really see that? You grew up thinking about it, having it given to you, and maybe you're hearing it as adults, too - can you see Jesus on a throne? The man who put his arms, figuratively, around a prostitute and made her his best friend - that's an emperor?

*My God and I walk through the fields together,
we laugh and talk as good friends should and do.
Our voices ring with laughter.
My God and I walk through the fields together.*

You have your choice. Jesus talked about God as a father, and I assume the best of fathers is like a friend that you laugh and talk with and walk through the fields together.

Now, I want very briefly to go to describe something more about religion as caring. I want to *define Spirit for you*, and I'll be back next week, I trust, to talk some more about it. But, I want to define the Spirit. It just doesn't get defined. I do a lot of philosophical reading and it just doesn't get defined, and I'd like you to take it home and think with it, about it, and put it together with my notion that religion is to care. *Spirit is to feel while you are aware*. Now, listen to this - it's not a "thing," almost anyone surely knows with their fourth-grade mind that it's not a "thing." It's not something that resides in the body and comes out. We've thought that for centuries. It's too late for that kind of thinking. We've got things to do. The Spirit is a part of the body and so much it is a product of the body, and is never found apart from the body. No Spirit apart from the body. And I gave it the simple definition and I defy you to exhaust it. You or the geologist or biologist or anthropologist or any physicist or chemist - it's a feeling awareness. Doesn't sound like very much, but it's the essence of being human.

We're not very aware, you know. I challenge you to go back over your drive here this morning to come to church - what do you remember of it? What were you aware of when you were driving? Oh, if something happens, you'd see it, if a red light came on or some child crossed the street, or somebody was driving - you'd see that and react to that, I know. Squirrels do that. But, what do you *feel*? What

are you *aware* of? Most of us live in a sleep, really almost 100% sleep. You can carry on business jobs just by being animal responsive. But, to be feelingly aware.

Do you see this beautiful hanging? Maybe you notice that it's red or black or white, but are you aware of it? Are you aware of that beautiful brick wall that you have? It's so fascinating to me. I've spent my ministry in a church with the most magnificent stained glass windows in America. I find this wall just a total fascination. I come in and I sit there and I look at it and I think about it. What are you aware of? Are you aware of the grass? I've been aware this whole season long of leaves. I can't believe the wonder of a leaf. And then of the trees - they stagger me! I cannot comprehend them. And I sit and look and I walk and look and I feel. The grass - yes. Leaf? - yes. Tree? - yes. Anything. How about a person? Are you aware of the person that you're living with? Or is it like your awareness of driving to church? Women are particularly alert to this. Do you see the face? Do you see the concern? Do you see the agony? Do you see the depression?

"You have eyes," said Jesus, "and you don't see." Mr. Rhem read that this morning. It's the most profound spiritual observation. "You have ears, but you don't hear. You have hearts and you don't understand. Woe is the person." To feel, to be aware of anything - anything!

*This is God's world. I hear Him pass in the rustling grass,
I see Him everywhere.
My listening ears all nature sings.*

Feeling awareness. And then you treasure it. It's no use bothering people about Sunday religion, but, of course, true, it's wonderful to have it, that kind of Sunday following a custom, routine - it's not enough! If you're going to treasure your spirit, *you have to treasure it every day!* Or you lose it. Very few people ever arrive at the spiritual level, you know that. Jesus knew it. Every spiritual person has known it. You have to *treasure* it. You have to *pay attention* to it as if it were important, as important as the money you used to care for. Or the success, or the arrogance, or the pride, or the power. You have to treasure it, because where your treasure is, there your heart will be, and where your heart is, there your treasure will be, and if you have a treasuring of the spirit, you have something that nothing can take away - neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creature. Nothing! You treasure it, and you're grateful for it.

You've got to be grateful, because you didn't make it. If you want to get down to the heart of religion, here's another one of those fundamental things - you didn't *make* it! The thing that you treasure. You didn't make the leaf, you didn't make the flower, you didn't make the tree, you didn't make yourself, you didn't make your mind, you didn't make your body. It's a gift. We call it the gift of God, don't we? So, you have to be grateful. No spiritual person swaggers with the qualities of the Spirit. No. No swaggering with the Spirit. It's just the utmost of gratitude.

And then you celebrate it. You celebrate it by - you come to church and you light candles and you listen to that beautiful, beautiful music, and you have a birthday party or you give a gift or you bake a cake and you gather your friends around and you hold hands, and you say, isn't it wonderful, the gifts that are ours? That's a celebration, and there's no religion without it. You have to have the Spirit there to make the celebration significant and real. Now, that's a description of religion as best as I can do for you.

What's the language of religion? Just a word or two now and that's all. What's the language of religion? I said *of* religion, not about religion, because the investigation of religion or of anything falls into the realm of scientific categories. You explore religion like you explore the structure of a city or of an institution or of a piece of metal. Thus, we use technical language when you want to discuss the nature of religion. But, what's the language *of* religion? I keep trying and I'm a preacher and I should know how to do it and I feel so helpless at it, and I want to tell somebody what it means to be in rapture by that blossom that I saw out my window. How do I *do* it? How do I tell somebody how much I love them? I don't know how to do it; you stagger and you stumble. We don't do very well at it. Well, *the language of religion is story, it's poetry*. Poetry is the nature of religious language, because you're explaining. You see something and you just let go. I keep thinking of David dancing before the ark of the Lord - just totally feeling. He expressed it in dance, like you do here so frequently.

I have an enduring memory of being out there last spring sometime and you had all those children dancing down the aisles. And there was one child who caught my imagination so that I didn't want to lose myself in the panorama of it. Interestingly enough, on the way home, the wife of the person I was driving with said, "I know who you meant. I saw that, too." What was it? I don't know. I couldn't describe it. But, that girl - she exemplified it to me, with all those children she exemplified the Spirit, the miracle and wonder of being human. We use myth and story, legend and song and dance and art. These are the language of religion. Mr. Bryson plays that organ and has that choir sing so beautifully - they're singing of the Spirit, if you have ears to hear. How better could you describe Paul's dilemma, which is yours and mine - "I want to do good and I can't because the evil's all around me. I want to do good and the evil takes over. I know that in my heart reigns the law of God, but there is another law, the law of my members entangling me in sin." How would you describe this?

Well, it's never been better done than it was in our religious heritage. In the beginning the world was wonderful, beautiful, and everything was there. And then God made man and it was all right then, too, except that man ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The fruit of the tree of knowledge. And then he became like one of us - gods, says the Bible. Knowing good and evil. And if you know good and evil, you'll never, ever be totally free! Because the evil is always there; it's part of being human. And that's our biblical story.

You want to describe the miracle of life, the wonder of being human, the wonder of a child which is where we see it most and should not confine ourselves there, do you want to describe the miracle of the birth of a child - how would you do it?

Well, we've had a description, a poetic, beautiful description that has been a cardinal part of my heart for all these years that I've been thinking about dreams.

There was a man and a woman, simple man and woman, carpenter and his wife - they had to go to a distant city and she was with child. But, they had to go and it was a difficult, long journey, and it came on wintertime and they were up in the mountains and the time for her came, and they didn't know what to do and there was no place to go. There was a little village up in the mountain and every place was filled because everyone else was going as they were going to this thing that had been called by the emperor, and they had no place, no place in the inn or anywhere. And the innkeeper gave them a place where the cattle were. Not much, was it? Oh, no, but it was something. It was a gracious act and it was some comfort and protection, and they were there with the animals, you see, and she gave birth to her child and it was just a miracle. And there were three kings who had been out on the road for a long time, looking for the glory of God. And they had been told that they could find it, and there was a star that they had to follow. And they followed that star for many days, many weeks, and finally the star came and stood over a stable. Stood over a stable. And they knew that that was the end of their search. They went in and found the child, and they brought their gifts as tribute to the miracle of God in human life. And there were some shepherds out in the fields, not just the kings, but some shepherds, ignorant shepherds. And all of a sudden, when they were keeping watch over their flocks, the air was filled with angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest, for unto you is born this night in the city of David a Saviour." And the shepherds went off, left their flock and went up into the stable to pay tribute to the glory of God and the child.

You have ears but you don't hear. If we were to listen, if we were to listen, *anytime*, we'd hear the angels singing.