

# The End of Religion

*Text: Isaiah 58:6-7; Luke 10:25; Jeremiah 22:16*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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Ken, I'm going to rehearse for the people what we have been talking about these weeks so that you can come on board, and they might finally get it.

It started off on Pentecost when we talked about the spirit of God and the breath of God or the wind of God that permeates the whole of reality - everything in existence exists because of the enlivening Spirit of God. And then, next week was Trinity Sunday, and we reflected together about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and we recognized that that ancient symbol was struggling to point to a mystery, and mystery not in the sense of something that maybe eventually will be able to be solved or dissolved, but mystery in the sense of that which is beyond our ability to comprehend, mystery in the sense of God being incomprehensible, as the old theologian said, incomprehensible to human understanding. So, we have a mystery that we cannot grasp, and yet the presence of that mystery, that life-giving Breath is present to all that is.

I came across a wonderful analogy in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, which I had never seen before. Saint Augustine, in a beautiful poetic expression, a prayer-like expression to God, said, "O God, You are like a vast, limitless ocean." And then he said all of creation, all that is, all creatures great and small, tables and pianos and stools - all that is like a sponge, huge sponge, yet a sponge with limits. All of creation, that 15 billion year old river of energy and matter and space and time, all of that as a sponge is submerged in that infinite, limitless ocean. The ocean, of course, is without limits, is more than the sponge, but there is not a molecule or an atom of the sponge that is not saturated by the liquidity of that infinite ocean. It's a beautiful analogy, I think. God more than, but a part of; not one thing exists that is not permeated, shot through with the life, the breath, the spirit of God.

But, the mystery, Ken, still remains undefined. What is its nature, its intention, its purpose? For us in the Christian tradition, we find that the mystery comes into focus in a face, in the face of Jesus. In the prologue to John's Gospel we have that wonderful poetic expression, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God, and all things were made by him and apart from

him was not anything made that was made, and that word was life to the world." And then a dramatic statement in the 14th verse - "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld a face." Thus, in the humanity of Jesus, the mystery is enfleshed. So now, the mystery which is beyond our comprehension but which is experienced as the breath that inspires and radiates through all - that mystery now has definition and specificity. It is the face of Jesus that shows us the intention of the Eternal One. That face of Jesus, that life of Jesus points us to compassion as the end of our religion, the purpose of our religion. And I say this on the basis of that parable which we already looked at last week, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Certainly the question of the lawyer coming to Jesus was right at the heart of things. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Aren't we always wanting to secure ourselves?

And so, Jesus pointed him to the Torah, love God, love neighbor, etc. And then the lawyer, wanting to make that somehow within some reasonable bounds, said, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus, unwilling to set any limits, says to him, in effect, you are the neighbor. You are to be neighbor to all of those who come your way. The story of the Good Samaritan concludes with the lawyer having to say the one who was neighborly was the one who showed mercy, and Jesus said, "Just do it."

That's the way of Jesus. That is the intention of the mystery that is God. Compassion is the end of religion - end, in the sense of purpose.

When Jesus said this, he was being true to his Jewish tradition. Recently, when I heard Karen Armstrong, the English scholar, lecture on *"The History of God,"* she made the point so strongly that all of the great religious traditions point, finally, to compassion. Compassion is the point of religion; it is to be the consequence of our devotion. Certainly Jesus was reflecting what Isaiah said in chapter 58. There was religion a'plenty, but the question is raised, "Is this the kind of fast I want? Would I want you to go around looking all droopy-eyed with sackcloth and ashes, carrying on a fast, going through your religious devotions, all the time still centered on yourselves? No," the prophet says, "All of your religious devotion is to no avail except it lead to compassion. Is not this the fast that I require, that you loose the thongs of wickedness, that you release the oppressed, that you take the homeless poor into your home and feed the hungry and clothe the naked?" Jesus, in the Good Samaritan story, or in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "Inasmuch as you've done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you've done it unto me" - points to compassion as the end of religion.

Jesus was simply being true to his Jewish roots. Ken, my point this morning is that religion's end, its purpose, is compassion. It is doing good. It is loving, healing, helping, and if it doesn't issue in that, it is empty, without meaning and without regard to God. Does that strike a chord with you?

**Ken:** Yeah, about 50,000. How much time do you have? (Ken plays & sings)

*So, here's a great, vast ocean  
And all Creation like a sponge  
And when I look into the water,  
it's amazing what I see.*

*First, I see the face of the One  
who came to make it clear,  
came to make it known  
for all the world to hear.*

*Then I look again - I can see the face of my neighbor  
and my enemy who lives here in this place,  
the people I've rejected, the people I've ignored,  
the people I've been closing out and setting outside the door.*

*And in this water I can see them, crying in their tears,  
and I see them looking now at me and I know why I am here!*

*And I see these faces reflected in the water of  
incomprehensible, mysterious space and love.  
And I know beyond the vastness of the Mystery,  
the great white sea.*

*Everywhere I look I see  
the reflection of the faces  
of the people close and far  
and in my neighborhood  
who need my good.*

*And I'm thrown on mercy once again  
and mercy I'm called to show again.  
And that's the end. That's the way.  
That's what it's all about.*

I think that's real close, and in my head I think I always knew that, but in the transformation of my own religious experience, Ken, I have come to see how, in my growing up and in my early ministry and in my preaching, I made salvation into a kind of cult. I made it into a kind of a cult that majored in personal salvation, the kind of "Me and Jesus." I wanted to be sure I was safe and secure and bound for heaven, and frankly, this life was something to be endured in order that we might really enter into life and light eternal.

I suppose the greatest transformation in my own experience is to recognize that eternal life is now and here and God is now and here, and this life is the life to be lived. I can trust God for whatever else there is, but even though in my head I knew compassion was an obligation of the Gospel, I didn't take it all that

seriously until I began to look at my own selfish, self-centered, egocentric, arrogant salvation lust. Not only did I make it a salvation cult but, in the organization and institutional forms of religion (and I've been a part of it all my life), I begin to see not much more than Trivial Pursuit. This is a time of the assemblies of the churches, and the newspaper is full of articles, great debates on such critical issues as whether to call God He or She, whether anyone else is going to get to heaven but those of us who know the formula, whether persons of different sexual orientation can be ordained to ministry, etc., etc. The media is full of articles about the fact that denominations are coming apart at the seams, and the more I look at it from the outside, the more I see how far we've missed the mark. How much we are concerned about things that are of trivial importance, and we fail to do the one thing needful, which is the whole end of religion. I believe that self-centered, arrogant religion is coming to an end. There's a great thrashing about now, the fundamentalist reaction is the last gasp of a dying movement.

We were guests of Bishop Spong a couple of weeks ago. As we left St. Peter's parish in Morristown, New Jersey, a beautiful church, all that stone and stained glass, he said to me, "This is quite an institution. But down the street is another Episcopal parish. That's a different place." He said, "There, when a stuffy Episcopalian comes in, the rector says, 'You know, I think you'd like the parish down the block,'" because that parish is filled with all kinds of marginal people, black and white and Hispanic, straight and gay and all sorts in between, all shades of humankind. They run soup kitchens and they have diversity seminars and they are involved in the community and the city. He said, You know, as Bishop I have to go once a year and I take in members, I lay hands on members, and there are always some who go through the Episcopal rigamarole, and if Episcopalians are anything, they are really strict about their liturgy and their forms - so here's the Bishop taking them through their forms and lays his hands on them.

And then the Senior Warden stands up and he says, "Now, are there any others of you who believe in this ministry and want to commit yourself to it?" And then a whole raft, another group, of people stand up who believe in the ministry. They don't really care about all of the rigamarole of the Episcopal liturgy and all of its ritual and all of its forms and the institutional form of the Church and the membership of the Church and the paper games that we play. But there are people out there who, when they see something authentic, when they sense there's ministry going on, when the compassion of Jesus Christ is flowing, they say, "Yes! I want to be a part of that."

Ken, the old forms are dying, but there's something new emerging, and it's going to be a whole community of people of all stripes and sizes and shapes who are going to band together and say, "Enough church games. Enough theological niceties. Enough of all of that selfish, egotistic concern about one's own little soul,

and let's begin to love the cosmos that God loves, and let compassion flow." How does that hit you?

**Ken:** Holy Mackerel!

*Ah, Baby, we built ourselves this little boat  
'cause we were frightened of the sea,  
built ourselves this little boat  
to put back the smokin' mystery.*

*Went ashore where the waves were,  
so we put off this little sail,  
What you gonna do when  
your little boat starts to fail?*

*We thought the boat would last forever,  
we thought we were so damn secure,  
And now we feel it tremblin' and there's water comin' in,  
Ah, now the dissolution does begin.*

*So, we're gonna jump into the water.  
The boat will be gone.  
We'll have to jump into the water,  
like a sponge, swimmin' on and on,*

*And we'll little by little we'll see  
the pieces of driftwood just floatin' away,  
As we jump into the water  
on a fine, fine summer's day,  
As we jump into the water  
as that old boat gets washed away.*