

## HOMECOMING

### 3) The Problem and the Promise of Organized Religion

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Nearly twenty years ago, I attended a conference in Fort Lauderdale in which the topic concerned the future of the church in a time of tremendous change. Bill Eassum, the author of the provocative little book, "Dancing with Dinosaurs," was our seminar leader and I will never forget the way he outlined his fundamental premise. "We are living," he said, "in a crack in history and we will not likely live long enough to reach the other side. As we go through this time of turbulent change, Eassum suggested that one of the challenges that we will face is a growing institutional suspicion—a suspicion that includes the religious institution we know as the church. There will be, said Eassum, not only a growing suspicion, but a growing hostility toward organized religion.

At the time, I must admit that it was a bit stunning to hear. Hostility? Toward the Church? That seemed a bit far-fetched in my world view at the time. Sad to say, I no longer find the idea far-fetched or surprising. Survey after survey today reveals that not only has the Church lost its place of prominence in our culture, but that there are a growing number of people who are openly hostile to its very idea of its existence. This world, they believe, would be a better place without "organized religion."

In response to those critics, I am sometimes tempted to suggest that, given their suspicion of "organized religion," they will likely feel at home with us here at San Ramon Valley where we often practice "disorganized religion."

**On a more serious note, I want to be clear that while I don't agree with this perception, I certainly understand it and can, in some cases, even sympathize with those who feel this way.** They will tell you that they have been wounded by the Church and its heavy handed, dogmatic ways...ways that tend to divide everything up into black and white ways of viewing life and faith. They may also tell you that they have felt discounted by the institution and its obsession with numbers and growth and its own security while largely ignoring the biblical call to give itself away in love and service to others. They might also suggest that they are tired—very tired—of those whose faith consists of pointing out all of the flaws and foibles of others while ignoring their own.

Let's face it. Organized religion—institutional faith—is highly suspect in the minds of many today. And, as a result, those of us who are a part of it in any form, are often tarred with the same brush. We are all seen, at least by some, as narrow, legalistic, homophobic, and literalistic Bible bigots who use the teachings of scripture to bolster our prejudice and ignorance. If you want to explore this anti-institutional sentiment a bit further, you can pick up the book, "God is Not Great" by Christopher Hitchens or view Bill Maher's documentary, "Religulous." These and other offerings like them, paint a very narrow and mean spirited picture of ALL religious faith perspectives. Indeed, they give the strong

impression that only ignorant, self-centered, and manipulative people practice faith. That, it seems to me, is a rather broad brush with which to be painted—or, in this case, tarred.

So, as I await my invitation to appear on “Real Time” with Bill Maher and offer my defense of organized (or even, disorganized) religion, I will sharpen my thoughts by sharing them with you this morning. There is, you see, another side of organized religion—a side that represents a thoughtful, other centered, compassionate and justice oriented approach to life and faith. And it is this side, I believe, that our culture needs to hear more about.

As a way of delving into this other side and what it has to offer, I would invite you to consider with me, the case study that our gospel lesson from Luke provides. In these nine verses from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we get a fairly clear glimpse of the problem and the promise of organized religion.

It is after Jesus’ time alone in the wilderness that he returns to Galilee, “filled with the power of the Spirit,” and begins his ministry. Luke tells us that the word about him spread quickly through the region and everyone was talking about him. With the excitement and enthusiasm building, Jesus returns home to Nazareth where he is invited to speak at the synagogue. As you might imagine, this homecoming was something no one wanted to miss. Everyone was there, crowding in to hear this “hometown boy” who had made good.

As was the custom, Jesus stood up to read the scripture lesson he had chosen from the Book of Isaiah. **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,”** he read, **“because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4: 18-19)**

Then, when he was finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, sat down, and began to speak: **“Today,” he announced, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**” There was a murmur of approval and pride. People were impressed with the skill of his delivery and the ease with which he spoke. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked in amazement.

So far, so good. It was a great first impression! And if Jesus had only stopped there, he would have had them eating out of the palm of his hand. They would have returned to their homes proudly singing his praises. But Jesus didn’t do that because he had something more to say, something that the hometown folks were not exactly eager to hear.

“Doubtless you will quote this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here in your hometown the things that we have heard that you did at Capernaum (a nearby town).’ Jesus then made it clear that he had not returned home to bask their praises or their blessing. He had returned home to remind them that God was at work in ways that did not necessarily fit their paradigm for the ways that God works.

“Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Then to illustrate his point, he continued: “The truth is that there were many widows in Israel at the time of

Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months (referring to a drought), and there was a severe famine over the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

At this point in the message, the proud smiles began to disappear from the faces of the congregation. Jesus was beginning to tread on thin ice...

"There were also many lepers in Israel," Jesus continued, "at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. With this bold and daring remark, the ice began to crack and break off into large pieces. No one was smiling now as the proud affirmations turned quickly into angry accusations. Luke tells us that the people of Nazareth were filled with rage! In fact, they were so angry and upset that they immediately tried to push off the hill upon which their town was built.

What an astonishing turn of events! It almost defies description! How is it possible for a people so proud and affirming to become so angry and menacing?

Jesus, in their eyes, had crossed the line. He had committed the unpardonable sin. He had dared to suggest that their particular expression of faith was not the only game in town. He had dared to tell them that God was also at work in those individuals who lived beyond the boundaries of faith that they themselves had imposed. Jesus, you see, had the audacity to suggest that God could, in fact, work in the life of a Gentile like Naaman the Syrian or a Gentile like the widow at Zarephath.

The thought was so outrageous, so unacceptable to the people of his hometown congregation that they immediately turned against him and tried to kill him. So much for homecoming sermons! There is, I suggest, a lesson here in this case study of a congregation—one that I am trusting will not get me pushed off the overpass or drowned in the creek!

The lesson, as I understand it, is essentially this. Organized religion has a problem whenever it assumes that God is only at work within the particular boundaries that it has established. Organized religion has a problem whenever it begins to "play God" and decree just who fits within the border of acceptability and who does not. Organized religion has a problem whenever it closes itself off to other faith traditions and other faith expressions as if they were, somehow, not valid.

This is why one look at the world picture today makes it abundantly clear that not only does organized religion have a problem, in far too many cases, it is the problem! At the heart of so much of the violence and conflict that we witness in our world is the bigotry and prejudice that has been fanned into flame by various religious fundamentalists and fanatics. And in fairness, it needs to be pointed out that this fundamentalism, this fanaticism cannot be limited to any one group, but can be seen across the spectrum of various religious faith traditions, including, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

I realize that in our current climate of fear, there is an assumption that it is Islam that is primarily to blame for the threat and the violence that we are currently experiencing.

The only problem with this assumption is that it points the finger of blame at all Muslims and refuses to recognize that some terrorist groups have, in fact, hijacked the teachings of Islam in favor of their own bloody and violent interpretation of that faith tradition—an interpretation clearly not shared by the vast majority of Muslims in this country and elsewhere.

Tragically, this thread of fundamentalism that leads to fanaticism is not isolated to the Muslim tradition, but is also evident in the Jewish and Christian traditions as well. Indeed, every religious tradition must contend with those within its ranks that interpret their sacred texts in ways that condone the use of violence and hatred in order to gain their intended goals of power and prominence for themselves and those that they deem to be true and faithful.

That is indeed, the problem of organized religion. We have allowed others to undermine and subvert the message of unity, understanding and respect that is the foundation upon which our traditions are built. If anything is truly fundamental, it is this understanding that we are linked together as members of the family of God and that we are our brother's keeper and that we are our sister's keeper.

Father Tom Bonnacci challenged those of us who attended the Martin Luther King service this past Monday to refuse to be silent in the face of the voices of fear that are calling for the exclusion of the stranger. He challenged us to stand up and to give witness to the God who draws the circle wide, the God who does not draw lines to exclude, the God who welcomes and includes and calls for all of God's children to do the same.

I realize that in our current culture, there are those Christians who interpret God's mandate very differently. I realize that there are still some who insist their particular faith perspective is the only true perspective and that all those who believe differently will be punished in some horrible way. That much is a given and we are not going to change their opinion. But what we can change is the opinion of those who believe that organized religion is not only part of the problem, but is the problem.

We can boldly and courageously begin to live out a witness of faith that not divide or exclude, but intentionally adds and includes. We can begin to model a way of living out our faith that practices deep respect for all faith traditions and the deep determination to honor the integrity of their views. This, of course, does not mean that we will all agree about specific doctrines or perspectives of God. It does not mean that we will suddenly come together seamlessly into a unified faith perspective. That, quite simply, is not going to happen—nor does it need to happen.

What it does mean is that we recognize our common set of values and that we implement a common understanding that it is our task, as people of various faith traditions, to give witness to the understanding, harmony, peace and hope that is our common ground. Now,

more than ever, what our wounded world needs are those who will courageously choose to live out the conviction that God's deepest dream for us is simply to work and walk together, tearing down the borders and the boundaries that divide in favor of the world that God intends...the world that Jesus so often referred to as, "the kingdom of God."

It was the poet, Rumi, who observed that ultimately, "We are all just walking each other home." That is, I believe, our task—to walk each other home—home to the faith, the life and the purpose that God intends for our world and for each one of us. Amen.