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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
October 2, 2011  
World Communion Sunday  
Matthew 21: 33-46

*Loving God, Jesus prayed that we might be one. One in spirit; One in mission; One in union and communion with each other and with You. Today, God, we confess failures in accomplishing unity, as we set aside yet another day to remind ourselves of the task. On this World Communion Sunday, give us eyes to recognize your reflection in the eyes of Christians everywhere. Give us a mind to accept and celebrate our differences. Give us a heart big enough to love your children everywhere. We thank you for setting a table with space enough for us all! Amen.*

### **“Spiritual but Not Religious?”**

Today’s sermon title is taken from a piece by Lillian Daniel, a UCC pastor in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. The piece began as a devotional for the UCC website, but was later published in the Huffington Post. A longer version of it was published in Christian Century Magazine, and that essay was based on a sermon Daniel gave at the Festival of Homiletics. What Daniel said in her piece about people who call themselves spiritual but not religious rings true with most clergy. But when her words hit the Huffington Post, they started a firestorm. I’ll give you fair warning: some people have labeled this piece snarky and self-righteous. Personally, I think Daniel’s satirical writing has sparked a worthwhile dialogue that we need to have.

She writes, “On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and ... did I mention the beach at sunset yet?

Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don't hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself.”

Ouch. That stings.

So much so that her essay garnered 569 comments from Huffington Post readers, most of whom felt it smacked of self-righteousness, which is the very attitude that keeps them away from church.

However . . .

There is some truth to what Daniel said. It's not that difficult to have deep thoughts by oneself. But having deep thoughts in a religious community, where those thoughts may get challenged, that is difficult. Listening to a sermon you don't agree with can be challenging, or listening to one that asks you to go even deeper with your deep thoughts, that can be challenging. Or having a dialogue with the preacher after church about why you didn't like the sermon, well that can be challenging too, because the preacher might expect you to articulate what it is you do believe . . .because that can be harder than articulating what you don't believe.

It's been my experience that the spiritual but not religious crowd can articulate quite well what they don't believe, but are not so articulate about stating what they do believe. And the vast majority of them think that people who go to church only believe what they believe because the church and preachers force these things down their throats. Or as one Huffington Post reader said, "I get tired of being told what to believe by the clergy," to which I always want to reply, tongue in cheek, "Then maybe you should bring your brain to church with you . . .because believe it or not, there are Christians who haven't yet figured out how to leave them at the door . . . something you might learn if you stopped staring at sunsets." But I don't say that, because, you know, I'm a minister, and ministers aren't supposed to have thoughts like that.

But just when I start feeling smug, I remember that there are ministers who say some really dumb things . . .like the late Jerry Falwell or the alive and well Pat Robertson, that really turn people off. Or, the spiritual but not religious person knows someone who can recite scripture left and right, but is cheating on his wife. Or knows a well-meaning church lady who is a busybody and loves to gossip and cast judgment.

Greg Garrett, professor of English at Baylor University, finds his students are interested in Jesus but repelled by what they see of Christianity and the church in the media. Marcus Borg reports the same phenomenon among his students at Oregon State who think Christians are narrow, fundamentalist, self-righteous, and judgmental. And another minister said he walked into the office of his youth pastor and saw lying prominently on his desk a book with the provocative title *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*.

Robert Putnam and David Campbell report in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, that one of the major reasons people are leaving the church is that the most visible Christianity is consistently described as homophobic, anti-science, prejudiced, and mean-spirited.

Right on schedule, the *New York Times* last week reported that an effort to prevent bullying of homosexual students in a suburban Minneapolis school system is being opposed by the Minnesota Family Council, identified in the paper as a Christian group. That makes me cringe when I read that—and I read it a lot: public Christianity portrayed as mean, narrow, self-righteous, judgmental, and opposed to efforts to prohibit bullying when the objects of bullying are gay and lesbian young people. Better to be spiritual but not religious rather than religious but not spiritual, some say. Ouch, that stings.

Today in Matthew we heard this really weird, off-putting parable which makes the spiritual but not religious glad they stayed home to read the *New York Times*. In the parable we have a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, planted some grape vines, and then leased it out and went on vacation. When it came to harvest the grapes, he sent his slaves to the renters to collect the produce. But the renters beat one slave, killed another, and stoned another.

So, the landowner sent more slaves to fetch his grapes. Of course, they did the same thing to the second group of slaves.

So what does the landowner do? He sends his son to fetch his grapes, because surely the kind-hearted renters won't kill his son, right? Wrong. They kill his son, too.

This is when Jesus asks the religious leaders, to whom he's telling this parable, "What do you think the landowner will do now?" "He'll come home, put the renters to a miserable death, and find new renters who will collect his produce."

The answer was correct, because Jesus then proceeds to liken the religious leaders to the renters who kill the son. "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus tells the religious leaders, "and given to people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom."

Ouch, that stings.

But most of Jesus' parables do sting . . . that's why he told them . . . to get people to wake up to the fact that God keeps sending all these people to build a world of peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness and what do we do? We keep rejecting them. And every time we do, we knock one more brick out of God's building plan and therefore, reject God.

The parable stings because it makes us look deeply and honestly at our lives and where we would fall on the list of people who reject God.

Who in our world, or our community, is rejecting God today?

Well, I can think of a few. The most obvious would be the new atheists, whose books are on the bestseller lists.

Also on the list would be people who are indifferent to Christianity and apathetic.

I'd include on the list the spiritual but not religious people who want a vague connection to a vague spirit that vaguely benefits their lives.

I would also include on the list people who two-time God, meaning people who say they serve God but really serve some other God, like the god of commercialism or materialism or greed.

And last but certainly not least, I would include on the list of people who reject God those who reject God's people as less worthy, less valuable, or less human than themselves. This would include people who reject blacks or Jews or gays or women because the Bible says that's OK. But when we reject some of God's people, we are rejecting the God who made them.

And in the interest of fairness, I'll put myself on that list for rejecting those who reject blacks, Jews, gays or women.

Ouch, that stings.

I'd go so far as to ask where you might find yourself on the list, but I can hear the spiritual but not religious people saying that's being too judgmental, and being judgmental is very un-pc these days.

But you know what? Jesus was judgmental. He told the religious leaders that if they kept on rejecting the world God is trying to build, the stone on which they'll fall will crush them. Those are very strong words. Strong words that people don't want to hear, so they stay home. And quite frankly, I can see why, because I don't want to hear them, either.

But folks, sometimes we need to hear what we don't want to hear. Sometimes we need a reality check. We need someone to grab us by the lapels and turn our focus outward, to other people, to God's people and God's world, and in that world there are people whose lives aren't so good, who need our help, who need us to get to work in God's vineyard. But we won't know that if we're spending all our time staring at the sunset.

You know where I see God? I see God in Jesus Christ. And in Jesus Christ I see embodied the life God wants us to live and the world God wants us to build. And that's one tough calling; it's certainly more than I can do on my own; it's more than Jesus could do on his own, which is why enlisted the help of others.

A recently glimpsed bumper sticker says, "*the world you desire comes not by chance but by change.*" The world God is attempting to shape through the ministry of the church will not be established by chance or coincidence or a vague spirituality. It will come only when people change how they live, no longer rejecting the will of God, but striving to live together in peace.

Amen.