

02/14/2024

Rev. Kate Byrd

## Spiritual and Religious

Have you heard the phrase Spiritual but not religious? People who identify with this “philosophy” often seek or desire spiritual experiences in their lives, but for one reason or another do not wish to find them through organized religion. Which, in all honesty is fair, we do have a LOT of history, try like 2,000 years in the Christian faith alone, and not all of it pretty. Either way, I have long pondered what it means to be spiritual but not religious, because without a practice or more so without community it can be very challenging to maintain any prolonged form of discipline. I could say I am a flute player, but I haven't practiced the flute, participated in band, or had an instructor for over a decade, so... my skills are lacking if not non-existent as a flutist right about now. And, it would be fairly preposterous for me to honestly proclaim myself a flute player. It is the same, at least for me, with religion. I cannot call myself spiritual without the practical application and the supportive community that religion, and in this case Christianity, offers me. But, what about being **religious, but not spiritual**.

This is the inquiry we hear from Jesus in our Gospel passage from Matthew, as he suggests to those around him "whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others" Or, "whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others." Or even, "whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting." As Jesus asks us to consider how we come to participate in our season of Lent, or even, maybe more so, our faith as Christians. Are we just going through the motions? Following the status quo? Or, even trying to support or appease another? How are we coming to the practices of our faith, so that the words become more than letters on a page, the motions more than an exercise in calisthenics, and the actions more than simply another check mark on an already overwhelmingly long to-do list? Just as it is difficult to be spiritual without religion, it is also difficult (or maybe even impossible) to be religious without spirituality. Because, what Jesus is getting at, is not that we shouldn't put money in the offering plate, or pray in public, or even wear ashes on our foreheads. But that, if we fail to do these things intentionally, if we fail to attend to our own spiritual needs, our religious practices can become empty. Which is why Lent is an integral part of our liturgical calendar, our religious practice, and our spiritual well being. As it invites us to return to the Divine that is at the center of our religious life and spiritual well being. Just as we are called, as we hear in Matthew, to pay attention to where our treasure lies, because that is where our hearts will lie also.

As we come to our invitation for a holy Lent, in just a moment, we will do so with our Litany of Penitence. And in so doing we will confess all of the ways we have fallen short, not because we are evil, but simply because we are human. And in this way we acknowledge the truth of our mortality, through our words. Even more so taking that truth on as we receive the ashes on our foreheads, hearing the words "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Because, as human beings there is no denying that we will fall short, we will mess up, and we will need to repent and return. As is part of our faith and our practice. Even more so, as human beings, made

in the image of God we are never without the presence of the Divine. And so as you receive your ashes today, and hear the words “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,” I invite you to also remember you our God’s and to God you shall return. This is the gift of Lent remembering that we are God’s and taking the time to return to that God, despite all the other gods (little g) who vie for our attention day in and day out.

This Lent what spiritual practice will you take on as you work to return to the source from which you came? There are so many ways to participate in a Lenten spiritual practice, and so I encourage you to pick just one, whether it be fasting, meditating, scripture reading, or whatever, just one which reminds you what it means to be both spiritual in your being and part of religious community that shares in truth that “ you are God’s and to God you shall return,” not simply at the end, but today, tomorrow and always.