

WHAT'S RIGHT ABOUT ORGANIZED RELIGION

Psalm 100
Ephesians 2: 17-22

Faith Community
November 10, 2002

Introduction

One of the things that has changed significantly in recent times is that, while people still see themselves as spiritual, they don't like organized religion. Recent Gallup polls have shown Americans to be spiritual - they believe in God and have a yearning for God in their lives - but they don't have so much interest in the organized religion.

Somehow people seem to feel that when faith takes an institutional form it loses its heart. A few years back, actress Susan Sarandon appeared on Good Morning America to promote her film, *Dead Man Walking*. In the course of the interview the statement was made, "This is really a very Christian film. Your character is quoting Jesus all the time." (The character she played was a catholic nun so it wasn't surprising that she would be quoting Jesus).

Ms. Sarandon's comment is indicative of the times, "Well, it's really Buddhism. It's really all religion before it becomes corrupted as they all do, and homophobic, and racist, and all the rest that religion becomes when it becomes institutionalized." Her comments indicate what a lot of people seem to assume - that all religions are good, but they degenerate when they become part of an organized institution.

Oscar Wilde said, "Religion is the fashionable substitute for belief." The assumption seems to be that faith and belief are good, but when they become part of an organized body they lose what they stand for and become something evil. Lenny Bruce was fond of saying, "Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God." As if someone couldn't stay in the church and be with God. The popular belief is that faith is good when it is individual and personal, but it is corrupted by organization.

I

Surely the church has done, and continues to do, a great deal that is wrong. Critics of the church often go back to the Crusades - probably the darkest hour in the churches life - and remind us of the horrific evil that was done in the name of religion. The church is blamed for the Holocaust, or at least for not preventing it from happening. Right now an enormous amount of attention is centered on priests who harmed children in their care. As much of a problem is those who knew about it and didn't put a stop to it, or who sent the priest off to another church to do same thing all over again.

Even within the local churches we find people who are out for their own self-gain. People hurt each other sometimes unintentionally, but sometimes on purpose.

The Christian church has a tremendously high standard - for some it is perfection - and it has trouble living up to that standard. The church is made up of people, and people will fail, hurt each other, and will sin. Just because we are in a church doesn't mean that will end.

Certainly, the church needs to lighten up on the bureaucracy and center more on people and their needs. We need to worry less about the organizational hierarchy and more about the

people in our care. I am painfully aware of this bureaucracy now as we fill out the Presbytery forms to allow us to borrow the money we want to make improvements to our church building and grounds. Although I am not as painfully aware as Joe Kofta who has been filling out the application forms for weeks now.

It has proven to be just as hard to get Presbytery to approve our loans as it has been to get the banks to give us the money – maybe more difficult! Certainly there are problems with the church; no one would deny that.

II

The church isn't perfect, but it is better than the alternatives. The church may not even be all that good, but it offers more than the other options we have. To me it's like what the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said about democracy, it has a lot of problems, but right now it is better than any of the alternatives.

Organized religion has its flaws, but it is better than disorganized religion, whatever that might be. It is better than personal religion unrelated to anyone else. It is better than faith without structure.

III

Organized religion keeps us from what I call "personal whim religion." This is "me and God together" without anyone else. It can lead to bizarre actions, like when someone hears God tell them to do something. We see these people on the news every once in a while. A person in handcuffs says, "God told me this building was evil and I was to burn it down."

At a more normal level personal religion can be a selfish and self-centered faith. The big problem with it is that there aren't other people involved. There isn't anyone to offer corrections or to say, "What you're doing isn't consistent with what Jesus taught us."

When we are in our own little world of faith we don't have the corrections of people who might say, "I don't think that's right." It's our religion, and we can believe God justifies whatever we do. I asked a woman one time if her child had been baptized. "Yes," she said, "I did it myself, in the bathtub." I must have looked a little surprised because she went on to say, "I asked God if it was alright, and I waited, and he didn't say 'no.'"

Without a community of faith it's easy to ask God, and if he doesn't say "no," just go ahead. We need each other because we can help each other understand the will of God. As we share our faith together we begin to understand what is appropriate and what isn't. In a community of faith it is helpful to have someone you can ask, "What do you think of this?"

IV

When we are in a family of faith we can explore our religion with other people. A strong community of faith supports one another, encourages and teaches each other. We need each other to grow. By our interactions with each other we strengthen our faith. One of the great things about being with other people is that they challenge us. When the church has a diversity of perspectives and life experiences the people in the church help us see a bigger picture. We get to see our faith with a wider lens.

Have you ever seen a movie and thought it was OK. But then you get in a discussion about it with other people who saw it and you find there was more to it than you saw by yourself. Someone says what they liked about it. Another points out a part that you had forgotten. There's some debate about what the film means. Before long you're thinking, "maybe I should go see it again."

Other people help us look at things from a different perspective – see things we haven't seen before. The same is true with our faith.

V

Organized religion offers us support. With personalized religion you're on your own. The institutional church means we are able to be without other Christians and receive their support. If we are alone in our faith, who prays for us? Who comes to the hospital to visit us when we have major surgery? Who calls us to see how we're doing?

If we aren't part of an organized faith community who will support us in our grief? Where will we go to take classes or learn more about our faith? When the church does its job right you are surrounded by caring people who want to help – not because they have anything to gain, not because they want to get something from you, but because they care about you.

Conclusion

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of you." Yes, Christ is with us when we are alone, but there is a unique way in which Christ is present when we are together.

When Jesus makes that statement, he is indicating there is something important about being with each other. Remember Jesus gathered twelve disciples. They went with him, learned from him, and supported him and each other. Jesus didn't send out individuals to do his work, he gathered them together, with him.

The best image of the importance of the church is an old one you may have heard before. A pastor went to visit a member who had not been attending church for quite some time. As they sat by the fire in the living room the member explained that he didn't really need the church. He knew what he believed and he had his own relationship with God. Why should he go to church?

The minister didn't say anything, but took the tongs, reached into the fire and took out one of the coals. He set it in front of the fire, by itself. As the two sat in silence the coal lost its flame. After a while the pastor lifted up the coal that had cooled. He showed it to the man, and then placed it back in the fire. In a matter of moments the coal was again burning brightly. Finally the church member broke the silence by saying, "Yes, I see what you mean. I'll be back. Thank you."

Amen