

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:2-9
"Spiritual Identity"

How many times have you heard someone say: "I'm spiritual but not religious"? It's a popular statement in these parts and might be making the rounds in the US and the world!

When people say they're spiritual and not religious they're saying they don't like organized religion. Their god is on a mountain, beach or...fill in the blank. I spoke with a 30-something person at the school across the road and she pointed to the top of Mount Tamalpais and said her spirituality resided there.

I get upset, cynical, miffed with a pinch of understanding when people tell me that they're spiritual and not religious.

I sort of understand that people are turned off by organized or institutional religion because of bad experiences in their upbringing and by what they see on television. It grates. I agree, but intelligent, mature adults need to move beyond this, but they don't. No doubt, there are other reasons for the shunning of religion.

I'm miffed because people ought to know that efficacy needs organization. How would schools, financial institutions, government, book stores, helping and serving agencies operate if they were not organized? Any gathering of people needs organization but organizations can be good, bad or indifferent.

We like excellent organizations. Tani spoke to us yesterday about her bank and it sounded like an excellent organization and it is getting better.

People are turned off churches that don't meet standards of excellence or at least aspire to such standards. We're an excellent organization and we aspire to be better.

It might be surprising to hear that I've done a complete turn on people who say they're spiritual and not religious because anyone who says that opens a door to conversation. When they mention spirituality in any form we can ask them what they mean and we can share why spirituality and our form of religion is valuable and we can even invite them to worship or a church-related activity.

When they come to worship they will experience meaningful spirituality with beautiful, eclectic music in voice and instrument and sacred texts read and interpreted. They will engage in prayers and silence and after worship they will meet an excellent group of people. Hopefully, they will be inspired to return and find for themselves the value of religion.

“Spiritual but not religious” persons are of two kinds: one articulates the statement outright or will speak about religion or the spiritual without claiming affiliation to any group and the other conveys their spirituality through actions which we interpret as spiritual. Either way opens a door for conversation.

Both ways relate to one’s spiritual identity as illustrated in two Oscar movies. First, we hear a reference to religion without claiming affiliation to a group in “Saving Face” a movie in the “Best Documentary (Short)” category.

It tells the story of a Pakistani plastic surgeon from England who travels to Pakistan to do restorative surgery on the faces of women disfigured by acid thrown on them by their husbands. There are about 100 acid attacks reported in Pakistan each year. Many are not reported.

The movie brilliantly portrays the doctor’s interviews with the victims and his surgeries. We see arrests and discussions with the attackers and witness legal challenges and policy debates.

The title of the movie “saving face” relates to what the doctor does and, in the doctor’s own words, refers to his own saving face since he is part of a society that does this kind of thing to women.

He makes a religious statement in the middle of movie while operating on a woman. He says something like: I may not be very religious but what I am doing will get me to heaven.

He claims little faith in religious language terms but huge faith in the scope of his work. He affirms a spiritual identity as one valued by God or Allah. One can imagine him telling his friends that he is “spiritual but not religious.”

In the second illustration spirituality comes through an action. In the movie “The Descendants” one sees a connection with the divine in the father who experiences the unfortunate consequences of being an absent parent and husband and thus makes amends in a story that has him reconnect with his children and his dying wife.

As the movie progresses the protagonist seems to go through various epiphanies and in the end he holds the face of his dying wife in hospital and calls her “my pain and my joy.” Like Jesus he becomes God-identified by accepting both the good and bad in humanity within the context of love. That’s how God in Jesus accepts and loves us.

One can affirm in a conversation with a person like this the spirituality of his or her act and continue a discussion on the value of spirituality and religion.

If we are bold enough to have these kinds of conversations and invite people to our worship service or to any church-related activity it will be helpful if we have a solid sense

of who we are and what we represent, in other words, our sense of spiritual identity. The gospel reading today provides a reminder.

We see Jesus going up to the top of a mountain with Peter, James and John and in a mystical way he is changed – or transfigured – on top of the mountain and Moses and Elijah mysteriously appear. Peter is flustered and fearful and says: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter identifies Jesus with the great religious figures of Jewish history and wants booths to symbolize their closeness to God. God *is* close for in that instant a cloud overshadows them, and from the cloud we hear a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” Moses and Elijah disappear and they see no one with them, but only Jesus.

The cloud represents the presence of God and the voice from the cloud is God’s voice. God establishes Jesus’ identity as his Son, in other words, God incarnate; and as Beloved, which represents God’s love in the world. Jesus is Incarnational and relational.

In the inauguration service of the president of San Francisco Theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Jim McDonald, last weekend, an inspiring men’s choir from the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, sang the words:

Because of who You are, I give you glory,
 Because of who You are, I give you praise
 Because of who You are, I will lift my voice and say
 Lord I worship You, because of who you are...

The song’s title, not surprisingly, is “Because of Who You Are” but the bulletin listed it as “Because of Who We Are.”

I waited for the choir to sing, “Because of who we are, I give you glory; because of who we are, I give you praise,” but they never did. Suellen said it was a misprint. I was convinced that they would sing “Because of who we are...” because I praise God because of who I am as a beloved child of God.

When we identify with Jesus we, like him, are beloved sons and daughters of God. That’s our spiritual identity and we claim it in the church and in all of life as bankers, investors, lawyers, doctors, merchants, homemakers, retirees, parents, etc.

Like Jesus our ministry is Incarnational and relational: We incarnate Jesus in our words and deeds and in our relationships to every one – especially those who say they are spiritual and not religious because I’m sure they really *want in* to something more solid and meaningful. Encourage them and invite them. At least have a conversation with them about spirituality and affirm that religion matters.

Maria Leonard, a book editor from Chicago, is quoted in the book *Spirituality@Work* by Gregory F. A. Pierce, that, “Probably the gift that most of us can give others regarding

spirituality is to share, in our own language and images, our own experience of God and our struggles to be faithful." We can do that in our affirmation of spirituality *and* religion. Amen.