

"Healthy vs Unhealthy Religion"

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Acts 17:16-34

This is a fascinating passage. Paul is in Athens, a very cosmopolitan place in the 1st Century. It was also a place where people liked to debate and discuss the great issues of the day. Paul has been causing some commotion in the city by his preaching, so they take him to a council that was in charge of monitoring those who spoke in public. This council met on Mars Hill and was called the Areopagus. Paul is speaking here with a very learned crowd. They are not at all part of the Judeo-Christian river that he is swimming in, but he treats them with great respect. Let's take a look:

Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him

All people are created equal, but all days are not. All days have 24 hrs. but some days are much, much longer. Many days get etched into our memories, but some days get etched into our psyche, into our collective soul. Some days change the world, for better or for worse. September 11, 2001 is one of those days.

I'm sure you can remember exactly what you were doing when you found out. I walked into the Fellowship Hall at the church where I was serving. The custodian had the TV on, which was nothing unusual. It was a very large TV and he often had the news on while he was working in the building. I walked in just as the 2nd plane hit the 2nd tower. I thought he was watching an action movie, which did seem strange to me given the hour.

But it was all too real, wasn't it? - a living nightmare. On that day where we saw the worst that humanity has to offer, we also saw the best. Compassion, kindness, unity and most of all sacrifice. For me, the most memorable line from that day was from a profoundly grateful man who got out of the 2nd tower, and he said this about the firemen - *"They were going up, while we were coming down."* Jesus said, *"No greater love has anyone than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."* No greater love. We were all friends that day. We were all family that day. I hope that today brings some of that back to our nation.

The days, weeks and months that followed were very emotional and very spiritual. Church attendance was at an all time high. On the Friday of that first week, President Bush called on all the churches and houses of worship to conduct a prayer service at noontime. It was a bit unusual, to hold a church service because the President of the United States asked us to do so. We had been having evening prayer meetings all week. And so I jotted down a few scriptures to read and two hymns to sing for the noontime service. Much to my surprise the church was packed, standing room only. And many of the people were not parishioners. They were just people who needed to pray, and they needed to pray with others. Some things are just too big to handle alone. Deep sorrow, like great joy, must be shared.

Rabbi Harold Kushner points out that the word "religion" has the same Latin root as the word ligament, which means "to bind" together. The purpose of religion is to bind us together with others. Kushner writes: *"Our place of worship offers us a refuge, an island of caring in the midst of a hostile, competitive world. In a society that segregates the old from the young, the rich from the poor, the successful from the struggling, the house of worship represents one place where the barriers fall and we all stand equal before God."*

That's what religion promotes - compassion and community. Healthy religion, that is. And we saw a lot of healthy religion 10 years ago. But we also saw a lot of unhealthy religion. News reports said that when Osama bin Laden heard of the success of the attacks he got down on his knees and thanked, "Allah," which is simply Arabic for God. He waged what he called a "Holy War," calling us "Enemies of God."

Unhealthy religion loves to make enemies.
Healthy religion loves to make friends.
Unhealthy religion wages Holy Wars.
Healthy religion works for a Just and Holy Peace.

Now, please don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that Christianity is a Healthy Religion and that other religions are not. I'm saying within all of us and within all religions, there is health

and wellness, and there is also unhealthiness and un-wellness. The story of Christianity has had plenty of unhealthy chapters in it - from the Crusades to the Witch Trials - from those who bomb abortion clinics to those who demeans gays and lesbians. Healthy religion recognizes there's unhealthiness within us all and within our institutions. And healthy religion seeks to combat the unhealthiness in order to make us more whole.

Healthy religion is respectful of other religions. Healthy religion sees people of other faiths as fellow travelers on the sacred journey of life.

My sons and I go to Acadia National Park every summer for our yearly camping trip. We love all the hiking and biking on Mount Desert Island. Three years ago we were on one of our favorite bike rides around Witch Hole Pond, and we stopped to look at this pond created by beavers and their dam. A father and his children were also there looking out into the pond for the beavers. I could tell by the way they all were dressed that they were Orthodox Jews. While all the children looked for frogs, having given up on the beavers, the father and I had a great conversation. I asked him the ages of his children. One of them was named "Mordicai." I said to him, that's one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Mordicai and Esther. *"They saved the Jews in exile,"* he replied. I then quoted the best line from the book: *"Perhaps God has brought you to this place for just such a time as this?"* Mordicai learned of a plot to kill the Jews. His cousin Esther was the Queen of Persia, yet she's Jewish. So Mordicai realizes that she's in the perfect position to save the Jews by telling the King about the plot - *"Perhaps you have come to this place for just such a time as this?"* My new friend smiled as I quoted that line. I was affirming his faith, his scriptures, which are also mine. There was a bridge for us to walk on together.

Acts 17 - The Apostle Paul certainly does that in our text this morning. He's very respectful of the religious nature of his listeners, even though he disagrees with them and believes he's offering them something much better. He has also taken the time to learn about their beliefs. *"Athenians, I see how extremely religions you are in every way. I have seen many inscriptions throughout your city. One of them read, 'To an unknown God.'"* He's about to tell them that the "unknown God" has made himself known to us in Christ. But he does so affirming the faith that they have. Later on he quotes one of their own poets, *"For in God we live, move and have our being. For we too are his offspring."* He finds common ground. He affirms their faith, all the while being fiercely loyal to his own. I come across many people today who don't seem to understand that - that you can be fully committed to your Christian faith, while still being open to the truth found in other faiths.

Hiking in Acadia, my sons have learned that there's more than one way up a mountain. Many of the trails are named for the mountain they're on - The Gorham Mountain trail, The Acadia Mountain Trial, etc. But some of the mountains are so big that there's more than one trail that goes to the top. Listen, God is a big "mountain"!!! They're are at least several ways to the top. How do you know which trail is best?", they once asked. "I've read the book. I trust this trail." Which is exactly how I feel about my Christian faith. I've read the book. I trust this trail. The unknown God has made himself known in Christ.

There's just one more point I'd like to make about Healthy Religion vs Unhealthy Religion. Perhaps the biggest contrast is this: Healthy Religion makes people more loving, not less.

I remember a couple that joined my first church in Pennsylvania - Nick & Joan. I bumped into their next door neighbor one day, who had an interesting observation to share with me: "They've

always been nice people. But now that they're going to church, they're even more wonderful! They're just nicer and happier!"

Here's one other example of a religion that is healthy. Just outside of Memphis, Tenn. there is a Methodist Church by the name of "Heartsong Church." The land across the street was their church was for sale and it was purchased by an Islamic congregation. The Methodist church knew that this could be a controversial thing in the Bible belt. And so they put a big beautiful sign on their lawn that read, "Heartsong Church welcomes the Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood." Doesn't that strike you as a Christian thing to do? When the folks at the Heartsong Church found out that the Islamic Center, which is a house of worship, wasn't going to be finished for Ramadan, do you know what they did? They opened their doors and invited their Muslim neighbors to use their facility for their prayers services during the holy month of Ramadan. Not everyone in the Heartsong church was thrilled about these gestures of hospitality. They lost 20 members of it. But the church leadership explained it very clearly. "Jesus told us to love our neighbors," their pastor said. "These people are actually our neighbors." The people at the Christian church even served as greeters when the Muslims came in for Ramadan services.

That strikes me as a beautiful expression of healthy religion. The Christians remained thoroughly Christian. And the Muslims remained thoroughly Muslim. But they met as neighbors, fellow travelers on the sacred journey of life. The two congregations have shared meals together, worked at a local homeless shelter together and are building a park together on land that they each own.

Religion ought to make us more loving, not less.

Religion should bring us more joy, not less.

Religion should help heal the world, not divide it.

On this Sept. 11 I think that's an important reminder.

That the world needs Christians who are healthy, whose hearts are full of the love of God.

Think about it.