

In the never-ending quest for new subjects for reality television, Britain's Channel 4 network has come up with the “Spirituality Shopper.”

That's right friends, this three-part series starred three people who were searching for something more in their lives.

It included Michaela Newton-Wright, a young woman with “a rewarding job in advertising and lots of friends” -- Yes, in my happy place, every British woman sounds like the queen of England or Julia Child, take your pick -- nonetheless, for Michaela, “something was missing in my life.”

Her goal was to sample four religious practices from four different faith traditions and find the one that best suited her. -- After all, we comparison shop for clothes, shoes, cars, girlfriends, digital cameras and dog food -- why not religion?

So Michaela tried Buddhist meditation, Sufi whirl-dancing, -- (and you thought square dancing was fun?)

She tried the Jewish Sabbath -- and, the Christian Lent -- which may not be considered, especially by those of us with growling stomachs this morning, as Christianity's most attractive religious practice.

Nonetheless, some of the most sacred and sustaining of the world's religious exercises were put out on the cafeteria line -- for the likes of Michaela to pick and choose as she saw fit -- I'll try a taste of this, I'll sample a bit of that...

What this exercise makes abundantly clear is that Michaela, like so many folk in our generation -- is not looking for religion, but spirituality.

How many of us know people who describe themselves this way? -- Hey, I'm 'spiritual but not religious'

Today's seekers, today's Christians even, are no longer bound by a specific denomination, dogma or doctrine

We can just imagine Jay Leno asking people on Melrose Avenue what the difference between a Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian is...

Most Americans, like Michaela, pick and choose from a wide swath of offerings -- filling up our buffet-line plate with delectable morsels that indeed, nourish us on our spiritual journey.

This phenomenon reveals the shortcoming of all religions -- our irresistible tendency to institutionalize and codify spirituality -- which, perhaps inevitably, leads to a split between religion and spirituality -- And this is something that was never meant to be.

At least, for Jesus, the two were never, ever supposed to be divided.

“Spiritual Not Religious”

Lent II, RCL-A, Sunday, February 17, 2008

Here’s an example, suppose you and I could go back in time -- we get in the passenger seat of a DeLorean with Michael J. Fox and we go backwards -- and we land in Jerusalem two thousand years ago -- and we approach Jesus –

And he’s in the Temple portico -- and we walk up to him as he’s teaching his disciples and we ask: Pardon me Rabbi, “Are you a spiritual person?”

We would probably get one big, blank stare.

After all, there is no word in Hebrew for ‘spiritual’ -- There is no category in the Hebrew mindset that would label anything as ‘unspiritual.’ (Rob Bell)

That’s because, to the Hebrew mind, everything was spiritual. -- Walk through a doorway -- there’s a mezuzah -- say a prayer -- it’s spiritual. -- Sit down at the dinner table -- don’t just pray at the beginning, pray at the end too – eating dinner is spiritual.

Look at the insane detail to everyday life that you and I get by reading Leviticus and Deuteronomy -- and we see that every part of Hebrew life intersected with every part of God’s -- Every part of our lives intersects with every part of God’s.

Put on our shoes, kiss our spouses goodbye, go to the bathroom -- yes my friends, there are prayers in the Hebrew tradition for each one of these human activities and hundreds and hundreds more -- because a basic understanding of the Jewish faith, and hence the Christian faith, is that all of life is spiritual.

The yearning for the spiritual is something that seems to be in all of us -- St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

Clive Staples Lewis described how every human soul possesses a God-shaped void.

It seems that homo sapiens are hard-wired spiritual seekers -- not all perhaps, but most.

And every new generation reminds us that our yearnings are not confined to the hallowed halls of the established church.

Look at an average North American today and their quest for spirituality.

The attachment to the formal trappings of religion are weakening -- An increasing number of people do not want to spend their time in religious services -- intoning words dreamt up in a time and place that can no longer be imagined.

They, like us, are yearning for spirituality not religion -- not an inherited framework, that at one point nurtured the spirituality of previous generations, but no longer does the trick for them.

They are looking to answer the deepest questions of their lives, just like you and me -- they are looking for and attracted to a sense of community -- they are looking for and attracted to an attachment to something larger than themselves -- they are looking for, and attracted to, something that gives all of us what we know, almost instinctively, as a deeper purpose for our lives.

Spiritual vs. Religious.

This is what Nicodemus was looking for.

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We are all familiar with this story -- Nicodemus was a Jewish leader -- a Pharisee -- steeped in the religiosity of his day -- which, if we haven't figured it out yet, was one of the most important things Jesus came to disrupt and defeat -

Jesus did not describe the Kingdom of God so much as a religion -- as a spirituality

And it appears that Nicodemus was not satisfied simply being religious -- he seemed to have a spiritual yearning that he was attending to.

This yearning took him, by night, to Jesus.

While it is popularly understood that Nicodemus went to visit Jesus after dark because he didn't want to be seen -- it is also entirely possible that Nicodemus went to Jesus at night because the rabbis taught that the best time to study the Torah was after sunset -- when everyone had gone to bed -- that still may be true in your house..

The spiritual quest, the best time to pray and study and seek the Lord, could be undertaken without distraction at night.

Because if religion is doing its job it will always lead to spirituality -- the problem is the disconnect -- which is what Nicodemus was facing -- Being a religious person wasn't enough.

Being a spiritual person was a call that had captivated his deepest soul.

Nicodemus approached Jesus because he knew this young rabbi could teach an old dog new tricks.

That's why we chose the bulletin cover we have this morning -- a much younger Jesus has something to teach a much older Nicodemus.

A much younger Jesus -- remember, anti-aging is just another benefit of being God

A much younger Jesus has something to teach a constantly maturing church -- like us.

And so we pick up the conversation...

Nicodemus says he knows Jesus is from God because of all the miracles -- so far in John's Gospel, Jesus has made wine out of water -- always a popular party trick -- And he has overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple -- luckily by chapter three, no one had called Sam Bernstein

So if we were to have begun our reading just a few verses earlier we would have seen that Nicodemus was not the only one who knew that Jesus was making a splash.

Right before Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus we read in John, Chapter 2:

“Many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

“But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people.”

These were religious people making up the vast swath of new followers of Jesus -- religious people who were touched and drawn to Jesus because of these miracles -- and Nicodemus is equally impressed.

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Except Nicodemus senses something more. -- He is evidently willing to leave behind the truth, as he has known it in order to explore something new -- even at his age.

This is a call that comes to each of us at every step of our own spiritual journey -- In what ways are we willing to leave behind the religious truth, as we have known it -- to explore the spirituality of something new?

It is this willingness to leave behind the limiting structures of religion -- and embrace the wily unpredictability of the Spirit that Jesus gets right into -- answering Nicodemus' with those familiar words: “One cannot see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

The key Greek word is “anothen” and can mean either ‘born again’ or ‘born from above.’

Modern scholarship, for the most part, tells us it’s the latter, which is what our translation reads.

And Nicodemus doesn’t get it.

It is into his left-brain, legal-scholar, word-parsing, religious mode, that Nicodemus draws a blank -- asking that stupid-sounding question:

“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

And this has unfairly placed Nicodemus in the halls and annals of Christian idiocy -- the placard underneath his statue reading “cowardly dolt.”

And this is certainly an unfair rap -- because His Honor Nicodemus, a respected judge, a member of the Sanhedrin and now an earnest pilgrim, -- was simply trying to figure out what this right-brained, heavenly-minded, heart-vocabulary of Jesus was all about. (Patricia Farris)

Jesus puzzles Nicodemus with images of the Spirit -- A Holy Spirit that is mysterious and blows like the wind -- outside of institutional boxes -- wherever it chooses, and answers to no one but God!

Jesus talks plainly about being spiritual.

Nicodemus doesn’t get it because he’s so used to talking about being religious.

And Jesus just can’t believe Nicodemus’ disconnect -- “How can these things be?”
Asks Jesus: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

And you and I can’t help but ask the same things of ourselves.

How has our religion -- our frameworks and formalities of understanding Christianity -- divorced us from who Jesus is, and what Jesus talked about?

Are we more spiritual or religious? -- We know what Jesus was.

Last Sunday morning at the 9:30 service, many of us wrote down our goals for Lent on little white note cards -- and we brought them forward and put them in a brazier --

And after service, one of our acolyte leaders, Steve Ernst, and a few acolytes burned them -- yes, that’s an added benefit to being an acolyte around here, you get to play with fire -- supervised of course.

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But, nonetheless, think about what we have given up or taken on for Lent.

Are these things that will make us more religious or more spiritual?

In other words, are we going through the motions of Lent -- vaguely trying to impress God by giving up chocolate -- which our preacher last Sunday rightly pointed out, always gets a bad rap -- or by depriving ourselves of some other enjoyment for the sake of meeting some fuzzy sort of religious obligation?

I know I have.

But the Church calls us elsewhere -- out from religion and into the spiritual.

The Church calls us to Lent not for religious reasons -- but for spiritual ones.

Lent is a period set aside to clean out the religious baggage that has accumulated in our attics. -- Lent is about bringing back into line the spiritual and the religious.

These two were never meant to be divided.

And Lent is the time we put them back together.

The people who assign our Sunday readings picked this one as an intentional reminder to you and me -- that we, like Nicodemus, fall prey to getting more into Church than we do into God -- and that a big part of Lent is putting the spiritual back into the religious.

Nicodemus has often been portrayed, quite simplistically, as an unbeliever who needed to be converted.

On one level, this is true. -- But it somewhat misses the point.

Nicodemus is a believer in Jesus who simply believes the wrong way and does not see what Jesus is all about. (William Loader)

Nicodemus is on a journey, and eventually he gets it.

In John (Chapter 7, verse 50), Nicodemus appears again -- he timidly sticks up for Jesus in front of other Jewish leaders.

Later on, after Jesus' death, in John (Chapter 19, verse 39) -- it is Nicodemus who volunteers to assist in the burial of Jesus' body.

Yes, Nicodemus finally gets it -- he is rescued from his religious life to a spiritual one.

Nicodemus recovers the spiritual life by following Jesus.

We recover ours the same way.

We go from religious to spiritual by getting to the basics of following Jesus -- when we live our lives not for ourselves, but for others -- which makes this such a fitting reading for our Deacon Al to have read on this, his last Sunday serving formally as our deacon.

For so many of us, Al and Ida Mae have shown us true spirituality -- as they have given to us first, while thinking much less of themselves.

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As you and I scan the religious landscape -- and we look at who we are called to be as a part of Jesus' ministry to the world -- we can't help but think that the key to our growth and renewal as a parish is tied into this very concept -- constantly striving to put the spiritual back into the religious -- being a place where these two are never divided -- where we see Jesus in every one of our rituals, traditions, outreach activities and social events.

St. David's is called to be a place where there is no difference between the two.

S.O.S. is a spiritual activity -- Christian Covers is a spiritual activity -- Our Lenten Challenge (today's service bulletin, page 18) is a spiritual activity.

And our most profoundly spiritual activity is what comes next. -- We are about to come together for our weekly ritual of breaking bread and pouring wine.

In it we see the essence of true spirituality -- A broken body to give the world the power and example of love victorious over all -- Spilled blood to give the world the power and example of endless self-giving, which is the only way peace on earth will ever come our way.

We do this on an altar -- as a symbol of our own self-offering -- You and I boldly pray that we too might offer ourselves up, as Christ did, to be used by God.

We ask especially today, that we might leave behind the bonds of religion -- and take on the spiritual task that is before us.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey was once asked, "Are you born again?" -- to which he replied, "I was born again, I am being born again, and I will be born again."

No matter where we are on our spiritual journeys, this altar calls us to the next level -- it calls us to be born again and again and again.

What is the religious stuff that we need to leave behind on this altar? -- What is the spiritual stuff we need from Jesus that is ever-present in this meal? -- How might this altar help us repair the breach between the spiritual and the religious in our own lives?

And perhaps more importantly, help us heal a desperate and fractured world whom God so loved, God sent Jesus into the world?

Let us come together around the table and find out.

Amen.

Lessons:

Genesis. 12:1-4a,
Psalm. 121,
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17,
John 3:1-17