

A couple weeks ago when I announced that I was going to be spending this summer preaching on the subject of spiritual formation, I’ll admit, my own first thought was, “David that’s a really bad idea.” No one wants to be told they need to go on a diet or get themselves to the gym, and no one wants to be told they need to get in better spiritual shape. Maybe, instead of talking about spiritual formation, you should talk about religious formation. But then I thought, no that would be even worse. Everyone knows what the statisticians and pundits have to say these days. Among the generations who attend church and consider themselves religious, millennials—who represent adults born after 1980 and who came of age in the late 1990s/early 2000s (as a sidenote, I miss being a millennial by just 365 days)—among millennials, *The Pew Research Center* reports that 30% are unaffiliated with any particular faith tradition. That means that 30% of people ages 18 – 38 in the United States today when asked to give their religious identity say, none. At the same time—and experience tells me this is true—when asked a series of questions about what they believe, millennials say they do not believe homosexuality is a sin, prayer works, there is an afterlife, and God is real.¹

What does all this tell us? I don’t have a darn clue. I think it says there is a growing disparity between our beliefs and what difference we feel our beliefs make when it comes to deciding where to spend Sunday morning. I mean, what does it say to us that whole generations are figuring out how to believe in God and be good neighbors without ever having religion or going to church? Have they found the better substitute for organized religion? Which is, no religion at all?

Well, with no disrespect meant to my own generation, I’d like to try and offer something of a rebuttal this morning. But first, whether we think the data is right and fair or not, it seems at least necessary for us to acknowledge that a whole lot of people woke up this morning and—thinking about how they were going to spend their day—rather than come here, they chose to go and do something else. I’m not referring to the people who are

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

often here and just aren't today—the people who we're pretty sure will be back next week, and whom we'll call to say, "Hey, you were missed today. I hope you'll be back next week." No, I am referring to the people who woke up this morning longing for love, looking for community, aching to hear a word of freedom, and thought, "I would go to church, but I've been there, done that. And still I long and look and ache."

Of course, we the church don't have to take the criticism. We can do what lovers sometimes do when they quarrel. We can say, "It's not my fault you don't like me. Your expectations are unreasonable. The reason this isn't working is because of you, not me." In a group like the church where there are lots of people and not everyone comes around for the same reasons or is looking for the same thing, it's not uncommon to hear this kind of talk. The 17th century Irish clergyman Jonathan Swift once said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." Put another way, I have been reading recently the book, *Not in God's Name*, by Jonathan Saks, the Chief Rabbi of the Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain. The book aims to provide a history lesson on the violence done by religious groups in the name of God, but more than this it gives witness to a God who says of violence: "Not in my name." The book stands as an invitation to Christians, Jews, and Muslims in particular to see one another less as 3 religions and more as 1 hope and faith for the world. In it he writes: "It is neither our secularism nor our religion that fuels our violence, but our fundamental 'groupishness.'"²

It would make for an interesting experiment, I think, to go around the room right now and ask each of you to answer the question: what makes you a part of this group? I wonder what we'd hear. I wonder if anyone would say, "I didn't know I was part of the group."

This past week I had, on two different occasions, meetings with colleagues. Early in the week, I sat around a table with a group of clergy; all of us ministers, priests, and pastors in various Christian churches. In an effort to get to know one another, a series of questions started around. At first the questions were mostly personal: Where are you from? Where do you live now? But at some point, almost without notice, the questions became: Do you

² Jonathan Saks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken, 2015), 40-41.

believe in the virgin birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus as the only way to God? In your church, do you require people to be baptized by immersion, or can they just get sprinkled? Do you believe in the Bible as God's actual word of truth, or only as inspired and imaginative story? I thought this last question was especially good, and I wanted to ask, "Why can God's word be only either true or imaginative? Can't it be both?"

Anyway, as these questions got asked around, I noticed—and I'm sure others noticed as well—that something started to happen to the group. We began to divide. It was almost like it wasn't enough for us to be ministers, priests, and pastors, or even Christians. It was about what kind of Christian you are, and which kind of Christian is better.

Sadly, this is the Christian story. We often hear said that as Christians we are one Church with a capital "C." We say this because it simply sounds nicer to think of ourselves as people who get along, whose differences we can see past. But the fact is, some of our differences stand out like flashing red lights that make me stop and wonder how some churches can call themselves Christian. And I'm sure they wonder the same about me.

On the other hand, I *don't* wonder if this is why—when a young couple comes to see me in my office to talk about having their baby baptized, and I ask them if they've ever been part of a church before, and there's an awkward silence that falls on the room—if this is why they often tell me, "We believe in God, but we think of ourselves as being more spiritual than religious."

More spiritual than religious. I get it. It sounds easier. Less messy. Less involved. You can have God on your own terms and back out at any time with no questions asked. There are no set rites and rituals, no order of service. No one telling you, this is how we do it around here. Being spiritual, you don't have to worry about groupishness, about being sucked up by the mob mentality. You can go in lots of different directions. Mix things up. Try a bit of everything.

I get it. The Church has too often taken the message of Jesus, a message that was supposed to spark a revolution of the heart and make a way in the world for the poor and a home for the stranger and teach us how to work our plowshares and not our guns and care for one another like we belong to one another, and instead we have used the message to

build up our own little kingdoms of protection and wealth. Walter Brueggeman has said that the problem with the church is not that we are too liberal or conservative, too traditional or contemporary, too old or too young. The problem is that “we have given up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settled for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence.”

I need to wrap up this sermon. I told Moira yesterday this sermon was going to be trouble because there’s so much I wanted to say in it. But let me leave us with this one image. In the gospel reading for today, Jesus is sitting around a table with his disciples. Very soon he is going to be handed over by Judas to the authorities, who will arrest him, beat him, and then hand him over to Pilate to be crucified. He knows his end is coming and so he tells his disciples, “I have to go away, but do not be afraid, for you know the way to the place where I am going.” Naturally, the disciples have all sorts of questions and concerns. Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Philip says, “It doesn’t matter if we don’t know the way. Just show us the Father and that will be enough.” And we can imagine at least one disciple saying, “What do you mean you’re going away? You’re going to break the group up, and just as we were all starting to get along?” But Jesus told them just yesterday, “This is not the whole group. I have other sheep whom I must also bring along.”

And that’s when the real concern sets in. “Other sheep,” they say to one another. “You mean, we’re not all there is. I don’t want other sheep coming along. What if, when they arrive, there’s not enough room for them? What if there’s no longer enough room for me?”

Jesus tells them again, “Do not be afraid. In the place where we are going there are many dwelling rooms.” Dwelling rooms. I like that. Not a sitting room where men of high society smoke cigars and pat each other on the back. “Congratulations for being so great!” Not a waiting room in a hospital where people sit helpless, waiting for someone to come in and tell them what’s going to happen next. Not a prison room, full of people who are known only by the number on their orange jumpsuit, and you can’t go between cells. Not a courtroom where judgements are handed down. Not a classroom where life is sorted out by who has the right, and who has the wrong, answer. Not even a living room, where all the furniture reflects the tastes and wealth of the owners, and there are enough seats for only

so many. But a dwelling room, where the only criteria for getting in is that you showed up and held the door for the person behind you.

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Yes, I believe we do. I believe this could even be the place. Amen.