

John 15:1-11
“The Spiritually Deep and Religiously Informed”

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I am moving in and out of a preaching series this summer on spiritual formation. This morning, with the two passages we have heard read, I am moving back in. If you're turning in for the first time in a few weeks, allow me to say by way of introduction that among the reasons I've chosen this topic for Sunday mornings is because I've grown fascinated lately with a certain perception. This is my perception (and I invite you to challenge me on it): among those who may choose for whatever reason not to participate in some form of organized religion today—and I am speaking primarily of my own generation who statistically speaking say they have no religious preference—the “millennials” as we have come to be called—among the most non-religious today, they are also considered the most spiritual. At the same time, among those of any generation who do attend religious services regularly, there is less and less talk of spirituality, leading to less and less commitment to spiritual formation. In other words, we have created a world in which religion and spirituality are separated from each other, only I would argue it's more of a forced separation brought on by the children in the marriage. Hold that thought for a moment, we'll come back to it.

In his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says in his opening line, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” If ever I was going to write my own definition of spirituality this would be it: not more smart, not more gifted; just more deep. And if ever there was a reason for why so many religious folk appear so unspiritual (again, my perception; challenge me on it), it would be that we have lost our ability to go deep.

Now let me be fair. It's hard to go deep when you don't know what you're looking for. When I was in seminary, now some 16 years ago, one of the books I remember being assigned to read in my first year was titled, *“Spiritual Marketplace.”* Honestly, I can't tell you anything now about its author or any points made in the book, but the title alone still resonates with me. “Spiritual Marketplace.” The idea that spirituality is its own thing, its own commodity that sits on a shelf in aisle 9 alongside all the other varieties of spirituality that you might want to look over before making your final selection. Like you're picking

out sandpaper and trying to figure out what grade you need—light, medium, light-medium, heavy, or take-it-all-off.

Unlike spirituality, religion strikes us as being a little easier to figure out, though it's not like religion doesn't have its own aisle of products. But generally speaking, the differences between, say, Judaism and Islam appear so great at first glance that one wouldn't think to go to the same place to get them. In addition, though—and our confirmands heard this from Rabbi Dolinger at Congregation Beth Shalom, the orthodox Jewish synagogue that we visited back in the spring—Judaism isn't so much something that you choose, as much as it's something you are born into. In other words, if you went to the store to buy a new religion, you probably wouldn't even find Judaism on the shelf. It wouldn't be there, because it's not available for purchase. The reason may be that if you are Jewish, you would never think to go to the store to trade up for something else. Because to be Jewish is to understand yourself as being part of a great historical movement and story. Whether you belong to an orthodox or conservative or reformed Jewish community, all Jews see themselves as part of an enormous family tree that stretches back 6,000 years to Abraham. It was to Abraham that God said back in the first chapter of the Bible: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." If you believe this promise, if you believe you are part of the blessed family, you're not going to walk away from it. You're not going to go to the store to cash it in for something else.

This isn't to say, of course, that people still can't—and sometimes do—change religions, or at least their place of worship. Case in point, I would guess that among all of us here today, most of us came from someplace else. We probably weren't actually born into Four Corners Community Chapel and to the life of a congregational church. I wasn't. But three years ago, I went to the store so to speak and looked at everything that was on the shelf—here in New England the selections are not all the same as what you can find in Pennsylvania or Virginia—and I said, "I think Four Corners Community Chapel will do." Sure, some of it was professionally motivated on my part, but a big part of it—the more important parts—were personal. Moira and I asked, "Is this a place that is giving refuge to the poor and marginalized? Is this a place that isn't just part of its community, but *is* community? Are the people who make up Four Corners Community Chapel people to

whom we can entrust our children? When they rub off on Lillian and Rowan, will the mark they leave be a good and lasting one? Is this a church that still believes it has a story to tell the world, a story of healing, inclusive love that has the power to change us? Or is this a church that has gone quiet, that believes there is no more change we can make for the sake of love?"

Needless to say, here we are. And yet, it always amazes me when I hear people tell their stories about how they got here that they will talk about what they miss in the place they came from. Maybe it's a particular hymn they used to sing a lot, or getting to celebrate weekly communion, or shorter sermons, or a certain family they used to share the pew with. Whatever it is, such stories are full of sentiment and remind me of what the Apostle Paul once said in writing to the church at Rome. Paul is a Jew and he is talking about Jesus, who is also a Jew. As Jews, both Paul and Jesus uphold the law of Moses, and they believe in the law as God's sign of salvation to the world. However, despite being a Jew, Paul has also come to believe what many of his fellow Jews have *not* come to believe. That Jesus—with his mercy for sinners, and his hospitality towards strangers, and his love of enemies—Jesus has become the very fulfillment of the law. And this has created an identity crisis for Paul, because he loves all his Jewish family members, and he doesn't know what to do now with the ones who don't believe the way he does. "What should I do?" Paul says to his new little church family in Rome. "I love you, but I also them. Are we not all grown from the same tree? Is it not the roots that came first, and if we dig up the roots, don't we all die? God makes no distinction between Jew and non-Jew. Should I?"

Paul's answer to his own crisis is to take a humble approach, which is usually the first best thing to do in any crisis. "Who am I to make the call?" Beyond this, though, I'm partial to what Jesus tells his disciples to do in our gospel passage, which Annie read for us. John chapter 15: "I am the true vine." Jesus is using the same earthy imagery that Paul uses when he talks about the family tree. He calls himself the true vine. For those who hear this claim and interpret him to mean, It's my way or the highway, Jesus adds this: "My Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." Notice Jesus doesn't call himself the root, or the trunk, or the biggest branch. "I am not the vinegrower. God is. God is the ultimate life source." Jesus calls himself the vine.

When Moira and I bought our house in Attleboro 5 years ago, we had a long line of trees along the edge of our backyard; maybe 12, 13 in all. Looking out the kitchen window, it was hard to tell what kind of trees they were, and which ones were alive and which ones were dead, because the whole line was buried in thick green overgrowth, which I would later come to discover was mostly poison ivy. One day we decided to cut down the line of trees to make room for some new shrubs and trees. So I put on my work boots and got out my chainsaw and ventured deep into the overgrowth and started cutting down the first tree. Only when my saw went all the way through the trunk, the tree didn't fall. It just stood there, suspended in mid-air. I looked up and saw that the whole tree was wrapped in this thick, brown vine that was running from tree top to tree top, and it was now holding up the dead tree.

Jesus calls himself the vine. Do you know why? Because a vine wraps itself around the whole tree, embracing not just the healthy, same-looking parts, but also those knots that grow out of the trunk and look kind of funky and ugly, the ones you think must be some kind of disease. The vine wraps itself around those as well, and also the small twigs that are half-broken and barely hanging on. And even the branches and trees that bear no fruit—the ones that get cut down—the vine being the vine still holds them up, too.

This is the job of the vine, says Jesus. As for the trunk and the branches, and those ugly knots and half-broken twigs, their job in one word is to “abide.” Abide. It means to bear patiently, to stay in one place, to accept without objection—wait for it—to live deeply.

I started out this morning saying that religion and spirituality are living out a forced separation from each other that has been brought on by the children in the marriage. This may be too general a statement, I don't know. It seems to me, though, that the work of religion, as well as of government and family and society on a whole, has become to help us differentiate between things. So that when we go into the market—knowing what we have been taught—we are able to make the right selection for ourselves and move on as quickly as possible. And it can work this same way when we walk into school looking for friends, or into church looking for a place to sit, or into the living room to watch some news, that we have learned where to go and where to look to find what we want. And I don't mean to suggest this is a wrong or terrible thing, like we should just pull everything we can off the shelf and take it all down with one gulp. It's good to know what you want. It's good to

know where you belong. It's good to know who your friends are. I can't help but wonder how differently things would be though—in our world, in our churches, in our country and on our borders—if we stepped back for a moment from what we think we know, and from what we are doing to ourselves and to our neighbors because of it—how frightened we have all become—and instead spent some time in the place where the fearful live. As your pastor, this is in fact the only argument you will ever hear from me on immigration reform. That we should go to the places where people hide in fear of living. I don't mean we necessarily need to go to Honduras or Guatemala, though that couldn't hurt. It may just mean we need to go deep into our own storied hearts and call out the fear and prejudice—and hope—that lives there.

“Stay and pray with me,” Jesus once said to his disciples on the eve of his death. But when he turned around to look, every last disciple had either fallen asleep, pulled a sword, or run for home. “No. Don't you get it? I am the vine, and you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing. Stick with me, and you will see stones roll away. You will see things once cut down and left for dead stand up and live again.”