

## The siren song of “spirituality”

1 Cor 9:16-23

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

We have noted in this season of Epiphany that the great false religion of our day is spirituality. In fact, we could say spirituality is the heresy of all 2000 years that Christian faith has existed.

What is spirituality? Those who are spiritual are those who are dedicated, those who are devout, who are sincere, who are other worldly. Who knows what all is included?

To sort this out, let’s look at what stands in contrast to all this. On the one hand, there is the impersonal, the abstract, the intellectual. On the other hand, there is the personal, the real, and that which is of the heart. It is as if there is the real and then the more real. Or there is that which is abstract, and there is that which is more real; we can feel it. It is of the heart. There is that which is outside of us and that which we can “experience.” There is often this sense of contrast: There is this world, and then there is more than this world.

Most of all, it has to be real, or more real. There is the sense that things are not the way they should be, but we can get there. It will be real, and there will be change and the like. Because we are a “how to” culture, we ask ourselves: “How do we get there? How can we make it real for us more of the time? How does it make a difference?”

Typically there are certain things that are understood and said, such as: “If you believe truly, if you commit yourself, if you open yourself fully to God, if you pray and surrender, then it changes.” Then the results will be that life is changed, life is transformed. Then we will receive guidance. Then we have a sense of peace that God is within us and really everything is what it should be over against an outside kind of religion. Spirituality is an inner religion.

What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that what it’s about? Frankly, what does the Bible say?

Of course there are all kinds of things in the Bible. As Shakespeare writes in *The Merchant of Venice*, even the Devil quotes Scripture for his purpose. Shakespeare is referring to the fact that in the temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13) the devil quotes Scripture. It goes to show that anybody can quote Scripture for their own purpose.

There is also what Ernst Käsemann, one of the greatest New Testament scholars of the Twentieth Century, said: “The New Testament is the mother of all heresies.” You can use the Bible to find anything.

But we ask: Isn't the gospel supposed to do something? Isn't it supposed to make a difference? Isn't there supposed to be something to hang onto and visible change? Since we're practical people, what kind of use is it?

In order to get at this, we recall what is in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation about the anti-Christ. The anti-Christ is not some terrible devilish figure. Rather, the anti-Christ is so much like Christ that many are deceived. What is it that deceives us? It is the deception of thinking that this battle is a battle that we are making some progress in.

In Ephesians 6:10-20 there is the famous description of the battle between the flesh and the spirit. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul says of Satan that he deceives many because he disguises himself as "an angel of light." Then as Paul himself struggled with his own thorn in the flesh, he writes: "Well, if it's supposed to make a difference Lord, then make a difference. Take away the thorn in my flesh" (2 Cor 12:7-9). He prayed earnestly for this three times, and the answer came back: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul then concludes: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

That says something about our expectation that: "Well it should make a difference." And the problem is: Yes, of course, there's Christianity, and we know we're for modern medicine and we don't just pray, we go to the doctor. We're for modern technology, and we don't just say: "Lord, take me from here to New York." We take a plane.

But when it comes to my own immediate life, we say: "Lord, I want a little miracle. I want that something extra, that feeling of peace. I want a sense that I know God's will, or that I've changed. It's got to make a difference, maybe not in that great outside world, but it's got to make a difference for me."

That's why we need to remember the basic message, the basic message of the cross and resurrection. The message is that the Lord comes to us in brokenness. He comes to us as the one who is defeated, and we know that through this everything is taken care of. That's why it is not by sight, not by whatever little miracle it is we think is a spiritual miracle, but it's by faith, by noting that in spite of everything, the Lord is in charge. In spite of anything, the Lord is in charge, and the Lord is working even if there is no evidence for me, no spiritual sense for me. The Holy Spirit is there and is never quantified. It is not that I have some of the Holy Spirit, but I can and should have more. No, one doesn't quantify God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

With that we come to 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul is struggling with these Corinthians and he writes in the second part of our text for today:

“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as those outside the law . . . to the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings.”

That places a terrible burden on the preacher. It really sounds as if the job of the preacher is to make it happen, to do whatever it takes. Hey pastor, why don't you pump up your sermon with a few magic tricks? I mean cartwheels, dancing girls, a weekly lottery, but basically to make it dramatic and to make spiritual things happen so that I am uplifted and become more devoted, so that that religious thing, that spiritual or other worldly thing, whatever it is the preacher is supposed to make happen, happens.

Commonly this is thought of as doing ministry. The pastor is supposed to make it happen. That's a common view based on a misunderstanding of the last half of the text (1 Cor 9:19-23) for today. It's important then that we go back to the first part of the text. How does Paul start out?

He says (1 Cor 9:16b): “Necessity is laid on me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” It's a great temptation, a real temptation, not only for the clergy but also for people in the pews to say: “We're making it happen.” Instead of remembering our task is to proclaim the gospel. What is that about? The gospel is that in Jesus, through his cross and resurrection, everything is taken care of. That's the answer, but it is very tempting to say: “**Plus** – it has to be made real.” And it's up to us to make it really real.

We remember another battle by Paul, the one that is described in the Book of Galatians. Paul there writes these striking things: “If anybody preaches another gospel even me or an angel from heaven, let him be damned” (Gal 1:6-8). Any other gospel than the truth of the Gospel. And then he says: “Oh, foolish Galatians: Who has deceived you?” (Gal 3:1). And then finally in Galatians 5:1-2: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast therefore, and do not fall back into a yoke of slavery.” But we of course like to have something more, something other than the freedom we have because Christ has done it all on the cross.

That's the temptation for preachers and for all Christians because we're wired, we made in such a way that we think: “There has to be something that is not by faith, but by sight.” Something more than by faith alone. Of course, then our salvation is not secure, not sure.

But thanks be to God that he has made it sure and we can depend on him, and it doesn't depend on spirituality because it is his doing. Amen