

Religious or Spiritual?

by The Rev. Paul Frey

“I’m not religious; I’m spiritual,” we hear these days. The Rev. Paul Frey ponders the difference.

When I think of the words “Spirituality and Religion” I think of them as two sides of one coin. And I believe that when we separate them we actually weaken our spirituality.

Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church, said that for many years when people told him they did not believe in God he tried to persuade them about the existence of God. But then it dawned on him one day to ask those people, “Tell me what this God you don’t believe in is like.”

He discovered that for many people their image of God was not the God he believed in either!

Almost 20 years ago, Dr. Robert Bellah, a sociologist, did a sweeping analysis of religious life in America, “Habits of the Heart.”

One of the striking things about the book was the number of people who treated their spirituality in a sort of grocery store way. They took a bit from this religious tradition and bit

from that. When asking one of the people interviewed what her religion was, she finally came up with “Nancyism.” Her name was Nancy.

I must confess that I am deeply attracted to “Supermarket Spirituality.” I am an American, and in the 21st century that means that I have “mega-choices.” I have multiple options for cars, groceries, games, movies, sports, media, clothing, cosmetics, medicines, travel, and on and on.

And yet I am rooted in a church that has a long tradition of a particular understanding of the nature of who God is, and how to worship. I think of these phrases:

“You shall have no other God’s before me.”

“Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one.”

“I and the Father are one.”

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

I meet people who tell me they are “spiritual” but not “religious.” When I explore

what that means, it usually means that they do not wish to submit themselves to any particular religious or faith tradition.

Yet, to be deeply spiritual, to connect to God in a way that is transformational, not just sentimental, requires religion.

I have a friend who takes prayer very seriously. He is so serious he devotes a room in his house that is only to be used for prayer. He attends worship at least once a week. His spiritual life is deep because he takes the religious part seriously. He is a devout Muslim.

I have another friend with whom I have celebrated several important religious events: a bar mitzvah, an anniversary, and others. Each time I go to the synagogue I am struck by a sense of coming home. It is clear to me that my Christianity is deeply rooted in Jesus’ Judaism.

And it is clear to me that Jesus’ disciples knew that the disciplines of worship, prayer, praise, scripture, charity, were to be passed on with the additions of a new understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Passover



supper. They did not form a spirituality think tank, or a spiritual society, but a community rooted in a long, disciplined, and vibrant religiously disciplined way.

To grow spiritually, to become a person who is transformed by God, means being part of a disciplined life. Attending worship, confessing my sins, receiving forgiveness, giving charitably, reading and digesting the Scriptures, feeding on the sacrament, praying and giving thanks are the disciplines that form me.

When I am confronted with the need to forgive, or the need to give sacrificially, or the need to be faithful in some area of life, it is that life shaped by my religious discipline that gives me the strength to follow through.

This shouldn't surprise us. I

am a bad golfer. Part of the reason I am a bad golfer is because I rarely practice. Now, with practice I will not become Tiger Woods, or Vijay Singh. But I will become a better player.

The analogy holds true for faith as well. To grow spiritually means to be religious about growing spiritually. To take spirituality seriously means to tend my spiritual life, and to do so in a regular disciplined manner.

For people like me, who want all the choices in the supermarket this is hard stuff. It means I must focus on a particular church community, particular times of worship, prayer, and sacrament. I must have a systematic form of reading the Bible, a

disciplined practice of giving.

If I am disciplined in my religious life, I will not likely become the next Mother Teresa, or Saint Francis. But I will grow spiritually.

I own golf clubs. I just need to use them.

I have a rich and rewarding religious tradition. God give me the grace to exercise it. †

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“ A doctrine-free spirituality risks descending into sentimentality, to the level of what makes us feel generally better about ourselves or reminds us in a wholly unsystematic way of the mystery around us; it is a weak support for resistance to the political and cultural tyrannies of our day.

Without the structures of both discipline and doctrine, “spirituality” can be vacuous and indulgent.

Love's Redeeming Work, Rowell, Stevenson, and Williams.

