

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 28, 2011
Sermon Series Part 2

RELEVANT RELIGION: LIVING DISTINCTIVELY IN OUR WORLD

“Love from the center of who you are...be good friends who love deeply.”
~ Romans 12: 9-10

The learning, it goes on forever. That’s what Rabbi Lawrence Kushner simply says in his new book *I’m God You’re Not: Observations on Organized Religion and Other Disguises of the Ego*.

Two words that I chose to include in my sermon title this morning - the second in a three part series on discovering the sacred in everyday life – upon further reflection require some heavy lifting. Relevant. Distinctive. Put those in the same sentence with religion and I suppose I have some explaining to do. Relevant Religion: Living Distinctively in our World is what I dared to propose in that title today.

By definition, the dictionary says *relevant* means closely connected or appropriate to the matter. That being said, I’m way up here in this pulpit and you are out there, a little too far away. That doesn’t sound very relevant to me, or necessarily appropriate or in proximity to the matter, so I’m leaving this perch behind for the time being. For our broadcast listeners, that means I’m moving out of the pulpit now and down toward the floor says the preacher turned liturgical commentator.

Distinctive means characteristic of one person or thing and so serving to distinguish it from others. It doesn’t mean by what we’re wearing necessarily – like this bold white garment I’m wearing, an alb as it’s called officially. One child asked me very bluntly once after a service: why are you wearing a bathrobe? While it distinguishes me to some extent, that is not the essence of what it means to live distinctively in our world by any means.

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Clearly in the span of fifteen minutes in conversation with you – though I’m doing all of the talking at the moment – we’re not going to resolve the dilemma, or in the spirit of being blunt – what I will suggest is the growing irrelevance of religion in our time this morning.

The PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life recently reported some instructive and disconcerting trends. Social hostilities involving religion have risen substantially recently in a number of European countries, including Sweden, Denmark, and the U.K. In fact, more than 2.2 billion people – nearly a third of the world’s population – live in 23 countries with increasing government restrictions or social hostilities involving religion. On the PEW Forum’s Religious Knowledge Survey, atheists, agnostics, Jews and Mormons are among the highest scoring groups, outperforming evangelical Protestants,

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Mainline Protestants and Catholics on questions about the core teachings, history and leading figures of major world religions.

But perhaps most instructive – and most relevant to this sermon today – is that despite the prominence of religious believers in politics and culture, America in particular has shrinking congregations, growing dissatisfaction with religious leaders and rising numbers of people who do not think about faith. In “American Religion: Contemporary Trends,” author Mark Chaves argues that over the last generation or so, religious belief in the U.S. has experienced a softening that effects everything from whether people go to worship services regularly to whom they marry. Far more people are willing to say they don’t belong to any religious tradition today than in the past, and signs of religious vitality may be camouflaging stagnation or decline.

Why I am bothering to share this with you? Because it is relevant information and given the theme of this sermon series, I want to be clear that I do not have my head in the sand, nor should you, and I suspect that you don’t. Regardless, before I go on about relevant religion and living distinctively in our world, we should be honest and clear about what kind of world we are living in, how it has and will continue to change. Gaining some context and a few facts is important. What does it mean for us and how we live and identify as religious, spiritual or both? What is distinctive about that for us? How do we see the world?

In *Crow Planet*, a suggested companion reading for today, Lyanda Lynn Haupt asks: “how, exactly, are we connected to the earth, the more than human world, in our lives and in our actions? And in light of this connection, how are we to carry out our lives on a changing earth? These are the questions, she writes, we are called to answer in this kairos, this graced moment of opportune crisis. Participating daily in the process of discovery implies our most urgent work as humans in the new millennium not because engaging these questions will make us smarter, or happier though it will certainly do all of these things. It is urgent because an intimate awareness of the continuity between our lives and the rest of life is the only thing that will truly conserve the earth. We cannot know a place well unless we walk the paths and know the breadth of our neighborhood and neighbors, on and off the concrete, above and below the soil.” Haupt contends that “crows are very much like us – at home – yet not entirely so in an urban habitat, gleaning what’s here while remaining wild, showing us what’s beautiful, what’s ugly, and what’s missing. Crows remind us that we make our homes not in a vacuum, but in a zoopolis, a place where human and wild geographies meet and mingle. They press us to our own wilder edges. IF we want to watch them well, we have to leave our own accustomed paths, the cultivated places, the neat edges of our yards and minds. We will find that our lives are not as impoverished as we’ve been told; the sidewalk is not as straight as we thought.”

While Haupt uses geography of the earth, Barbara Brown Taylor, in our second companion reading, *An Altar in the World*, uses a geography of faith. Both of these

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authors I believe do a beautiful and deeply inspiring job in reminding us that there is more to life than what meets the eye. They have both witnessed themselves, and others, draw close to this more in nature, in art, in love, in grief. Brown Taylor says “that if she had a dollar for every time she hears some one say I’m spiritual, not religious, she might not be the wiser, but certainly the richer. She knows that people are trying to tell her they have a sense of the divine depths but are not churchgoers.” I hear this often from Stanford students, from couples for whom I officiate their wedding or blessing and from families planning memorial services. While religious is a word that refers to a formal set of beliefs, spiritual may be tougher to grasp. It may be the name for a longing – for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life.

Some of us inhabit both worlds. “Even religious people,” says Brown Taylor, “are vulnerable to this longing and have acquired certain patience with what is sometimes called organized religion. They have learned to forgive its shortcomings as they have learned to forgive themselves. They do not expect their institutions to stand in for God and are happy to use inherited maps for some of life’s journeys.” But even those in faith communities, she reminds us, can harbor the sense that there is more to life than they are being shown. They want to grow closer to God, but not at the cost of creeds, confessions, and religious wars large and small.

What I appreciate most about Barbara Brown Taylor’s book is that it is practical, real, and relevant if you will, and delineates several practices, both of which require a body and a soul. Some have long histories in religious traditions, like walking meditation, pilgrimage and prayer. Still others are the essence of everyday life like eating, singing, getting lost, encountering others, blessing others, digging potatoes, being sick. They are not exhaustive by any means, but what they are and have become to me and surely the thousands of others who have read this book is a palpable example to what both of our ancient scripture texts from today illustrate, that is a full bodied pedagogy, a method or practice of teaching, that both the Romans text that Dodie read for us and the gospel of Matthew illuminate.

Allow me to revisit some of the text from Romans by reading from a translation called *The Message*: “Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life for good. Don’t quit in hard times. Be good friends who love deeply. Be inventive in hospitality. Get along with each other. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Discover beauty in everyone. Don’t insist on getting even – that’s not for you to do. If you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he’s thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.

In a time when we seek relevance in religion, and the popularity of the term spirituality – or the phrase “I’m spiritual not religious” – Paul’s letter to the Romans is an invitation to remind ourselves of what is both reasonable and bodily about our relationship in and to the world, and what it means to be distinctive as people of faith and practice.

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Contemporary writers like Barbara Brown Taylor and Lyanda Lynn Haupt are doing the same. The type of love described in this Romans text is energetic and profoundly optimistic, and surely countercultural in nature. The Romans text is intellectually reflective and practically active. They move hand in hand. Paul invites the community to which he was writing – and now us – to consider love and good to be constant partners accompanying us and providing context for both attitudes and actions.

Dr. Paul Farmer travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like tuberculosis in regions of severe poverty and inadequate health care. In doing so, he deals with the medical establishment, various bureaucracies, and local traditions. He is profiled in Tracy Kidder's book *Mountains beyond Mountains*, where Kidder explains that Farmer approaches all people with a hermeneutic (an interpretation) of generosity. This means evaluating people's actions from the assumption that their motives are good, even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite. Relevant religion and living distinctively have something to do with not only the way we treat and relate to all that is part of life in the world, the earth included, but also in the way we treat one another. We are called to live by a different standard, both within and without the walls of our religious buildings. This is the hard part. I'm still working in particular on the hermeneutic of generosity toward Congress and their debt-ceiling debacle. But I digress.

The Jesus in today's gospel of Matthew is clearly not the professor or scribe who teaches from a distance, but a good shepherd who lives with, leads and feeds his sheep, heals their wounds, protects them and is willing to lay down his life for them. And we know where this story goes – he is to undergo great suffering at the hands of elders, chief priests and scribes because he desires to be the shepherd of the real, messy, flesh and blood institution of religion instead of the invisible, pure and undefiled one. If we want to live out our religious/spiritual convictions with distinction toward any manner of relevance in our world, we're going to have to sweat, weep, die and sacrifice ourselves in many ways. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" – so it says in verse 25. One commentary I consulted put it this way: "the amazing thing about the gospel is precisely that God chooses to become not so immaculately conceived by coming as a despised Jew in the Roman Empire, a lowly Galilean among the Jerusalem establishment, living in the mess of humanity and ultimately becoming a victim of that collective dysfunction."

To live distinctively in our world not only means to become more fully human as Jesus modeled, but also to live with some vulnerability with, toward and for others. If religion is to have any relevance in our lives and in the world, our concern cannot be first and foremost the purity of the institution known as organized religion or the rightness of our doctrines. It means that we have to enter fully into life as Jesus did and participate in the ongoing reformation of religion itself.

As Barbara Brown Taylor asks us: "if you are tired with arguing about religion, tired of reading about spirituality, tired of talk talk talking about things that matter without doing

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a single thing that matters yourself, we have to start where we are and recognize some of the altars in this world – ordinary looking places where human beings have met and continue to meet up with the divine More that they sometimes call God. The central practices of the world’s great faiths are meant to teach people what it means to be fully human. In a world of too much information about everything, bodily practices can provide great relief.” To make bread, to dig in the earth, to feed animals or cook for strangers and friends, observe the patterns of urban crows, to smile at the cashier at the supermarket, to not keep your distance - these things require no extensive commentary or lucid theology. “Most of these tasks can indeed be so full of pleasure there is no need to complicate them by calling them holy. And yet, these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes all at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone. In a world where faith is often construed as a way of thinking, bodily practices remind the willing that faith is a way of life.”

The learning, it goes on forever.

Amen.