

Got religion?

Acts 17:22-31

May 1, 2005

Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?

I've never been very fond of that word, *religious*. The word conjures certain images in my mind: candles and prayerbooks and folded hands; clerical collars and Sunday clothes and choir robes; pictures of angels, pictures of Jesus, pictures of people with halos around their heads; being quiet, being nice, being reverent; holy, holy, holy ...

I don't want to be holy; I want to be real!

When I hear the word, *religious*, I think of all the trappings of doing church or any other religious observance -- the rituals, the icons, the traditions. I think stuffy, formal, confined, confining ...

I don't want to be religious; I want to be free -- free to think and feel and act in ways that are new and fresh and authentic!

These are some of the images that come to my mind when I hear the word, *religious*, but I am also suspicious of the word because it points to a kind of generic spirituality. A *religious* person is one who acknowledges the existence of a higher power, one who relies on Providence, one who believes in God in a general sense: *Of course, there is something out there, something or someone that may be of help from time to time when necessary, but leaves me be for the rest.*

For me, it's always been personal, not about being generally religious, but about coming to terms with a particular God, about building a relationship with this particular God, because this God demands it, because this God doesn't leave me be, because this God confronts me and challenges me ... and saves me.

I don't think of myself as a religious person. I think of myself as a Christian.

Maybe Paul felt the same way. I don't know. When Paul arrived in Athens and walked around the city, he saw the trappings of religion everywhere. He was upset by the pervasive presence of idols, religious icons, representations of this god or that god, all products of human art and imagination. He was upset by all this muddled religiosity, all this worship of who knows what. He even found one altar inscribed, *To an Unknown God*.

So he engaged the people of Athens in conversation. He talked to people in the synagogues and he talked to people in the public square. He debated Epicureans and Stoics and he told everyone about Jesus. He got people stirred up and curious about this new teaching, enough so that they had him brought before the city council to explain himself. *And Paul stood up in front of the city council and said ...*

What Paul said is remarkable, simply remarkable!

I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious ...

He does not belittle their spirituality, he affirms it. He does not attack their religious

culture, he meets them where they are. He begins the conversation where they are. He acknowledges their worship, even of a god they cannot identify. He acknowledges that they are indeed worshipping the Lord ... they just don't realize it!

That which you worship even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you ...

Paul tells them about the God he knows, the God who cannot be contained in any building or temple, the God who needs nothing from us because this God is the source of everything that is!, the God who cannot be justly portrayed by any image of gold or silver or stone because we are the image of God.

We can learn a great deal from Paul's style of evangelism. He meets people where they are, he acknowledges their frame of reference, he speaks their language, he quotes their poets. But he tells them the truth, he tells them the truth that he knows, he tells them what he has seen and heard, what he has seen and heard and knows of the living God ... not your god or my god, not their god or our god. The living God is not a God we can fashion or imagine, but a God that fashions and imagines us. The living God is not a God we think up, but a God who thinks us up.

Paul affirms the value of their *religion*. Religion in itself is a good thing because to be religious is to recognize that there is something beyond ourselves. Religion puts in us a measure of humility, a healthy humility that allows us to keep things in perspective and to look for truth and value and meaning outside of ourselves and our own wants and needs.

Paul affirms the value of their religion, but points them to something more. We need something more than mere religion. We need a deeper humility, a humility that opens our minds and hearts to see the God who is already there, already near, a humility that allows us to admit that we do not find God, but that God finds us, that we do not figure God out, but that God shows us who God is. We need a deeper humility that allows us to say, *Yes*, to Jesus.

God is not unknown. God has a name ... and Jesus tells us that name. God is not whatever we imagine God to be: God has a particular character and particular ways ... and Jesus show us what they are.

God is patient. God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, when they wandered about in a spiritual wilderness. But God is just, God will judge the whole world with justice. Jesus has shown God to us and we have no more excuse! God raised Jesus from death. What more proof do we need?

Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?

If you do, fine and good. Your religious nature has you looking in the right direction. And if you do not, fine and good! Whether you are religious or not is not that important. Whether you are religious or not may be a matter of upbringing or a matter of personality type, it may be a matter of personal habit or a matter of personal taste.

But faith in God has nothing to do with being religious. Faith in God has to do with a personal relationship made possible for us through the life and witness and death and resurrection of Jesus.

I know there are those of you out there who do not consider yourselves very religious. Fine and good! I don't care whether you are religious or not, and I don't believe God cares either! What God wants is what Jesus told you God wants:

Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself ...

It's not about religion. It's about relationships -- your relationship with the real and living God, and your relationship with your real and living neighbor.

I don't think of myself as a religious person. I think of myself as a Christian. I think of myself as a follower of Jesus.