

"Organized Worship"

Grove Presbyterian Church

October 4, 2009

It is a good thing Abraham didn't say, gee that makes sense, I guess I'll believe it. Instead he listened, heard, and heeded, then it began to make sense.

Hear the message then realize: this begins to make sense
Too many discount religions because they get it backwards, saying that only when it makes sense will I believe it.

As Christians, are we a confederacy of separate entities, or a union of one entity? Are we marbles rolling around in a box occasionally bumping into each other, or are we a gestalt, mutually dependent?

Babinski reflex - extension upward of the toes when the sole of the foot is stroked firmly on the outer side from the heel to the front; normal in infants under the age of two years but a sign of brain or spinal cord injury in older persons.

Paul offers his answer with the metaphor of the body. Listen.

I understand that many people gain strength and renewed faith by participating in organized worship, but this does not feel like a good fit for me. I see this as a common practice for my parents' generation, but I do not see myself reflected in the congregation. And while I see the value in the sense of community that church provides, I find that my relationship with God is more personal - I feel a stronger connection to my faith in the solitude of a nature hike, for example.

Why is it always a walk in nature? Trees, butterflies, and sunsets? Isn't a walk through Greenwich Village also a walk in nature? Or Centralia?

Implicit in today's question from a young adult is the notion that nature is restorative. And by nature what is usually meant is not everything part of the natural world - which is everything from sunsets to machine guns - but the

more selective pleasant part of nature: flora and fauna,
the environment.

What a great big wonderful world!

I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people going by
I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do
They're really saying I love you.

I hear babies crying, I watch them grow
They'll learn much more than I'll never know
And I think to myself what a wonderful world
Yes I think to myself what a wonderful world.

Perhaps it is apropos that today is the Saint Day of St.
Francis, when lots of churches will honor St. Francis with
the blessing of animals.
Cute and cuddly animals: kittens and horsies and doggies...

Anybody bringing their cobra or alligator, rat or lion?

Where does this assumption that nature is mystically
benevolent come from? That somehow we'd all be better if
we lived in harmony with nature?

Maybe. But I guess they're not talking about the nasty
nether side of nature. Cancer is nature, typhoons are
natural, my cat nibbling on little bunnies also is nature's
way of doing it.

For every Eden there be serpents...
For every dreamy-eyed philosopher Rousseau there is the
pragmatic Lord of the Flies and what happens with school-
boys on an island...
For every garden there be poison ivy...
And every utopia ends up in a fist-fight...

Which is why our religion listens to a God beyond nature:
supra-natural.

We hold that nature cannot reveal God for God is revealed in the Word, the Christ. But nature can make us alert to God. Disease, for example, does that pretty well. Thoughts on cancer drive you to look for the justice of God. Thoughts on the capricious unfairness of the natural world makes us appreciate the consistency of God's Goodness.

But then, more than this 'nature,' the more telling word in this very typical and quaintly conformist modern question is the preference and reference to 'solitude.' Stronger connection to faith when solo. The solitude. It's interior. Unsullied. Private. Personal. And that's lovely.

Jesus chose solitude too. Solitude. Jesus appreciated that too. Time away from the crowds and noise. Time to think. Time to listen to himself breathe. Time to ponder his relationship with his Heavenly Father. Time to stake out himself against conformity to the organized religion of his day. Time for him to create inner meaning. Private. Personal. Interior. Individualized.

Which also means it is easy. And safe. Which means it's listening to your own voice. It also buys into a false duality of either/or - as if faith is either personal or corporate. Of course a relationship with God will be personal, must be. But where does the faith come from that allows you to reflect on faith and your relationship with God during that hike in the woods? How do you even know how to define the nature of your relationship? From yourself? I don't think so.

Listening to Jesus' teachings doesn't make you Christian. Jesus wants more than pupils. He calls followers, those who stake their entire life on him, those, who depend upon these other imperfect other followers to make visible the body of Christ in this world.

Fortunately, God smiles kindly all those times we try to define God by the self. The virtue of others is that through others the Spirit speaks to me and me to them

It's more than me. More than a supportive network. It is Thou and Thee. A community of memory. How else is God known and appreciated except through others? I know of no other way.

Jesus took his personal into the corporate. That's what made it real.

Personal religion? Fine and lovely. But only when faith is a messy us - prone to illusions and fist-fights -- that's when it gets real.

Personal religion? Fine and lovely. But that's easy, for you don't have to do any thing about it - nothing is required of you.