

Scripture: James 1:19-27

Sermon Title: "The Good Kind of Religious"

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Spiritual but not religious. I would guess that many of us have heard this phrase before as it has grown in popularity and usage over the last several years. Spiritual but not religious. Maybe even some of us embrace this phrase as a way of describing our own connection with God – describing our own journey of faith. This particular way of labeling oneself has increased in the United States, mostly over the last 6 years.

According to the Pew Research Center, about a quarter of Americans in 2017, 27% to be exact, considered themselves to be spiritual but not religious. This is up rather significantly from 19% in 2012. And this study was done by asking two questions – "Do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?" and "Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?" leaving open the interpretation of what is religion and what is spirituality.

Now, it would seem that for many, the desire to not identify as religious comes from a general distrust or dislike, even hurt caused by organized religion and I would say it comes with good reason. A lot of bad things have been done in the name of religion, certainly including in the name of Christianity – religion has been used to hurt others rather than help and heal. There has been a lot of hypocrisy in organized faith circles – saying one thing and doing another. There has been a lot of judgment and exclusion based on manmade rules. There has been a lot of "holier than thou" mindsets within organized religion. For many, these are the reasons that one might choose to avoid the label of religious. And still for others, it may not be based on negative connotations but rather on the sense that God can't be found within the confines of one religion or one expression of a particular religion, even though so many it seems claim to have gotten it right while others miss the mark. So for these reasons and probably more, the spiritual but not religious label has grown as folks seek to distance themselves from organized religion while still seeking something greater than oneself.

In some ways, religion has gotten a bad name, oddly enough given to it primarily by the actions of religious people. Yet, there is still such a thing as a good kind of religious – one which we will explore today. In our reading from the letter of James this morning, we are reminded of three virtues which give meaning and value to religion – that without them, religion is not only not good, it is as James puts it, worthless.

The first virtue is to have a bridled tongue – what interesting language. Literally control what you say – pull the reins on these words that will not build up but seek to tear down! The words that bring pain rather than healing. In this, James reminds us of the importance of listening over speaking. He tells us to be slow to speak. Maybe it's not always best to say the first thing that pops into our head! Maybe it's not always best to respond in the heat of the moment. Instead, let us listen, learn, process, and if speaking is required, do so in a way that helps rather than harms.

The second virtue is not just hear the Word but do the Word – don't just hear the call of our faith but do it. Let Sunday transform your Monday, Tuesday, and so on. James explicitly names two ways that this is done by caring for the orphans and the widows, something which comes up frequently in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures, as a sign of righteousness. This past week, I was reflecting on one young man's response to this call. His name is Cameron and in 2005, when he was 17, he visited a small, impoverished village in South Africa with a group called Leadership Now – an initiative to encourage young people to be the next leaders and to change the world for the better. It was a faith based program encouraging these young people to be not just hearers of the Word but doers. On this trip, they visited an orphanage and did some work for the kids. Cameron clearly made a bond and connection with that place, more than any of the others on the trip. He cared so much for that place. The next year, in 2006, the director of the orphanage called Cameron and asked for his help to raise funds for the orphanage which was struggling to make it. So as a freshman in college, he set out to learn how one raises money. He met with the president of the college to find out how they solicited big donors. He talked to others in the advancement office and put

into motion a learning process to see what he could do to help out this orphanage. In all of this, he embrace the importance of listening first.

Now, several months later, while he was still formulating a plan and listening to learn, disaster struck. Cameron received a call that the orphanage burned down. Thankfully, everyone was okay. Yet now, this orphanage which was barely making it by was without a building and without any means to care for the children. Cameron knew he needed to do something. He knew of the call to care for the orphan but now he needed to do something about it. So he called the directors of Leadership Now – these Christian folks that told him he could make a difference and a fundraising campaign began almost instantly. By text messages, emails, phone calls, Cameron reached out for gifts of any size and folks forwarded the need. Through this campaign, in a few days, they had pledges for \$10,000 dollars and in 3 weeks, they reach \$30,000 with the help of many people living out their faith. And this money in this village was enough provided temporary housing, clothing, food, school supplies, and began construction on a new building. After that, Cameron continued to work with the orphanage, raising funds and soliciting support and a new building was eventually completed. He didn't just hear the call to care, he did it – he lived it. All who gave did just that. So should we. That's the second virtue, to not just hear the teachings of our faith but to live them out.

And the third virtue of the good kind of religious is to remain unstained by the world. This does not mean being removed from the world, that would in fact stand in contradiction to living our faith. Rather it is a reminder to not let the things around us cause us to lose sight of the teaching of our faith – the lessons from Jesus. Don't let the world around us take away those first two virtues. No matter what may happen, no matter what shifts may occur around us, hold on to the care and compassion for the needy and for our neighbors. No matter what may happen, listen over speaking. This is a huge one today. In our society, there is far too much speaking and not enough listening. We listen just enough to form a rebuttal, we don't listen to learn. We don't

listen to understand. Yet, let our faith not be stained by this shift in our world. May we as followers of Jesus, still listen and be slow to speak.

Beloved People of God, it is our call to be the good kind of religious – to break the mold and preconceived notions that others may have about religion and live into this listening and life-giving faith. We must not be a religion that is founded on hurt, hypocrisy, and speaking with a holier than thou attitude which has driven many away from the church. We must be the good kind of religious which is built on healing, helping, and listening with our humanity. For that is where Christ is truly found. So be it and may it be so. Amen.