

“Religious – Not Just Spiritual”

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, grace to you and peace.

In today's second reading, written in the middle of the first century, St. Paul famously tells the people at Corinth that they are the Body of Christ.

Now hold that declaration in mind while I skip to the 21st century, to today. I'm quoting from the Globe and Mail, that near the end of December, self-consciously listed the most influential Canadians of the coming new year, now four weeks old. Among them is a woman named Ingrid Mattson. She is a white Canadian Catholic woman who grew up attending daily Mass. Or, at least she used to be. She is still white and she is still Canadian but she is not Roman Catholic or Christian any longer. She is a convert to Islam and a professor at Harford Seminary in Connecticut.

Her story is that at a certain point she no longer believed in the God they talked about in the church. So she abandoned religion altogether until she met some kindly Muslims who led her to the mosque where she felt close to God. Then she says something as if grasping it for the first time. She says something as if grasping it for the first time. She says that she discovered that God was no longer in the church, but he was everywhere – in nature, in art, and in the welcoming faces of the Muslims. Mattson converted at age twenty-three.

Where has she been? It is a remarkable thing for a former Christian to say and one wonders what she learned from them, because for all its faults, the one thing that the Church, and especially its expression in the Lutheran, Catholic, and Anglican tradition, is famous for its sacramentality. That is, to say its Christian imagination. We don't usually think of ourselves, this way, for our heritage is northern European, a little stuffy at times, but we have always been an extremely sensuous church, art, wine, water, oil, candles, stained glass windows and the world. The Christian Church, at its best, has always held that the world is bursting with hidden signs of a gracious God.

Francis of Assisi was its spokesman when he sang of Brother Sun and Sister Moon on the Christian poet Gerald Marley Hopkins, who wrote, “The world is changed with the grandeur of God.”

In other words, the church has always held that God is not confined to church buildings or churchy institutions. It is not the church's view that we live in a world devoid of divinity and come to church to find refuge from the world. On the contrary, in the church's eyes, our life, our holiness, our sanctity, our witness are to be found outside these walls, in the arena of our lives. Our sense of God's presence is to be found in our prayer, relationships, work well done, virtue in hostile places, and in the beauties of nature and art and music.

If this is so, then why do we go to church? Why do we persist in coming to church? Here's my answer. The answer is that here in church, as an assembly, we get refocused, empowered, renewed, nourished, and fed in order to be the Body of Christ when we leave here. Here we are virtually reminded that we are more than the sum of our individual selves. Here we are reminded of who we are, what we are – the people of God. With this knowledge reaffirmed, we are thus strengthened to return to our place of God - discovery and God - witness. With our sense of God's special presence here, we are ready to see his face in every flower there.

But there's one more thing, why we go to church. My thoughts anyways. We go to church to be released from our self-delusions that we are the centre of the universe, always a temptation. We are here to be challenged by simple presence of others who are different from us and whom we are forced to rub shoulders with, whether we like them or not. Going to church, you see, is going to a place not of our

choosing, to be with people not necessarily of our choosing, and breaking bread with people not of our choosing. In short, going to church keeps us humble, makes us realize we belong to more than those in our gated communities and that we are a part of a worldwide family past, present, and future. Being here reminds us that we are united with those in every corner of the world, from basilicas to barrios, from palaces to prisons, who at this very moment, are worshipping God who they know must perfectly in Jesus Christ and we are they and they are us. We are here as the Body of Christ. We are here to reaffirm this truth. No one travels to God alone.

My friends, this belief you must realize, effectively undermines the popular slogan so commonly embraced today, and I've used it myself, "I am spiritual but not religious. I have no need of organized religion. I'm a player and move on a different plane." What a deception! Sometimes I think it is a common conceit tailor made for the "Man Generation" – here the self is the sole measurement of existence. It sounds so "free." In this spiritual world there is no one to challenge you. "If it feels good, do it." In this spiritual world you don't have to sit with those "others." You can hang around with your own like-minded group.

In this spiritual, but not religious world, you are not beholden to anyone but yourself. In this spiritual, but not religious world, no one is going to point an accusing finger, because who can judge the self? In this spiritual, but not religious world, everyone's opinion or truth is as good as another's, so all is flattened out. Judgements and social actions are both unnecessary and arrogant.

In this spiritual world no one is ever wrong – they're just in a different place – and, of course, consequently, no one is ever right either. In this spiritual world truth is what I believe it to be, morals are what I determine. In this spiritual world it's Me and God and I don't have to deal with that smelly person off the street who came in and knelt beside me and struck his breast and cried, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Okay. I realize that I am being more provocative than I usually like and it really isn't my style. But I do struggle with this whole debate between spirituality and religion, between "I am spiritual but not religious." I really have been there myself and I say that as one who has worked in the church for almost 30 years as an ordained pastor. There have been many times when I have wanted to walk away from the church and, even, my religion too. Honestly, religion for us who would also describe ourselves as spiritual is, sometimes, too much work. After all religion is annual meetings, and disciplines, and dogmas and pews full of those other people. Spirituality travels lighter. It dabbles in the esoteric, in secrets hidden from "others."

In this "I-am-spiritual-but-not-religious" world it's not St. Paul's insight, as we heard today, that we are the Body of Christ. It's the self-serving slogan, "I am an army of one." But the church says no. There is no army of one. That's delusional at best and dangerous at worst. Rather the church offers memories, traditions, looks to ancient wisdom and pits our lives against those of our contemporaries and predecessors in the faith. It demands communal living, understanding, and worship and gives challenge to our lives. As the poet T.S. Eliot wrote many, many, years ago:

"Why should we love the church? Why should we love laws? She tells them of life and death and all they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard and hard where they would like to be soft. She tells them of evil and sin and other unpleasant facts."

Solo "spiritual" persons don't have to listen to stuff.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Let me try to summarize. We are the Body of Christ. We are here communally to celebrate the Word and Sacraments, the good news, to take courage from each other's presence and thus braced, to be sent out. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" – with new eyes. To see the grandeur and love of God, to bring God to home, neighbourhoods, school, and workplace so that

others too might see what we see, so that people looking at us might see what that former Christian saw in those Muslims. That God is not confined to church. God is here in nature, in art, and on the welcoming faces of other Christians. In the name of God, who loves us all. AMEN.