
Can You Be Spiritual, But Not Religious?

A Sermon from the Very Reverend Sam Candler for the Buckhead Community Thanksgiving Service

With the Churches and Choirs of The Cathedral of St. Philip, Peachtree Presbyterian Church, Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, Wieuca Road Baptist Church, Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, and the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King.

At Peachtree Presbyterian Church

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

First Corinthians 12:12-27

My thanks for you!

I give thanks to our hosts tonight, all who worship and who lead, at Peachtree Presbyterian Church. I give thanks for the excellent and faithful musicians of our six parishes. I give thanks for the Buckhead community. And I certainly give thanks to my five colleagues, the other five senior ministers here tonight - pastors of what have to be the finest Christian parishes in the country!

But I give thanks, mostly, for you” you who are assembled as one body tonight, one body, with very many members.

It is a busy season. Many families and households are getting ready to travel. Some have already left. Many are already preparing to buy gifts and decorate for” dare I say it?” Christmas itself.

But you are here, gathered together as one body. One Body of Christ, from several denominations.

And so I want to remind you of the story I told a few years ago. Some of you have heard it before, but it bears repeating, especially on a night like this.

Do you know how many Christians it takes to change a light bulb?

Well, it depends upon your denomination. If you're a charismatic Christian, it takes only one. Your hands are already in the air.

If you're a Pentecostal Christian, the answer is: Ten. One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against spirit of darkness.

Presbyterians: None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times.

Roman Catholic: None. Candles only.

Baptists: At least 15. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

Episcopalians: Three. One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Mormons: Five. One man to change the bulb, and four wives to tell him how to do it.

Unitarians: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including: incandescent, fluorescent, three way, long-life, and environmentally sustainable, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Methodists: Undetermined. Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church-wide lighting service is planned for Sunday. Bring bulb of your choice and a covered dish.

Lutherans: None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

Finally, the Amish: What's a light bulb?

Yes, we all have our ways of changing a light bulb, or lighting the room, or lighting the world with the light of Christ. We all have our ways, and they are good and healthy ways.

Every kind of Christian here tonight has a different way of lighting the world for Christ, and the world needs every one of your ways.

Tonight, in the Spirit of Thanksgiving, I give thanks for all these ways of being a Christian. The body of Christ, as we heard in tonight's lesson, does not consist of only one sort of member. The complete Body of Christ needs all the members.

The Body of Christ. You know, later this week, there will be lots of concerns about bodies. Thanksgiving seems to be one day of the year when we give ourselves permission to feed our bodies. Families have been planning for weeks what they will eat. Traditions are remembered. Some dare to start new traditions. Then we eat. We drink. We have second helpings. Our great aunt forces us to have third and fourth helpings.

Maybe next week, or next January, when the feasting is over, we begin to care about our bodies in a different way. We go

back on diets!

I know the dieting is important. But, tonight, I want to say that the eating is important, too. Bodies are important in Christianity. It is part of our historic, orthodox, and catholic faith that Jesus Christ descended from the heavenly kingdom and was incarnate; he was a real live, flesh and blood, body.

It was through a body that Jesus Christ served and changed the world. It was through a body that God loved the world. And it is through a body that God still loves the world.

God does not work in the world through some dis-embodied spirit, like a kind of ghost. God works through people.

Have you heard the phrase lately, "I am spiritual, but I'm not religious" ? Of course you've heard it. Many of us have probably said it. I know what we mean when we say that. We mean that we enjoy the spark and the life of God, the wonderful spirit of love and wonder, but we don't get so much out of organized religion.

Right. Organized religion can so often get in the way, can't it? Even though I work in an organized religion, I know what people mean when they make that complaint. Sometimes, the church seems too obsessed with trivial matters.

Maybe that's why people are always leaving church and looking for something else.

Have you heard about the man they discovered all by himself on a desert island a few years ago. Apparently, he had been living there successfully for years, all by himself. No one else there.

When they found him, they also discovered three buildings on the island, right behind him. They asked him, "What's this building?" "Why," he said, "That's my home, my house. That's where I live."

"Oh, that's good," they said, "and what's this second structure?" "Well, the man replied, "that's my church. That's where I go to church."

"Excellent. How beautiful!" the crowd said. "And what's this third building on the island?"

"Oh," the man said, "that's where I used to go to church."

No matter where we are, it seems, we can find a reason to leave church. We can find a reason to leave organized religion.

Tonight, however, I want to say something about organized and institutional religion. I give thanks for it tonight. I give thanks for churches, and for an important reason. These communities of faith, even if we struggle and fall short time and time again, these communities of faith are exactly the way we are spiritual in the world.

I do not believe it is possible to be a spiritual person in this world without being religious. Oh, I realize along with everyone the great thrill and excitement of feeling one with God. Sometimes we feel that on vacation, or at the mountains, at the lake, or at the beach. Or even on the golf course, or just early on a beautiful morning.

It's great to feel spiritual. But the moment we try to do something with that spirituality. The moment we try to connect it to other people. The moment we try to take it out into the world "well, right then!" is the moment we become religious.

Religion is spirituality in the flesh. Religion is spirituality when it takes on a body!

The word "religion," comes from the Latin word "ligio," meaning "to tie." The word "ligament" comes from the same word, Ligaments tie together the muscle and the bone in our bodies. "Religion," "re-ligio," means to tie back together. To re-connect. Good religion is about tying things back together.

Can you be spiritual without being religious? I don't think so. I suppose you could try it, but it's a very lonely life. Being spiritual without being religious is to be by yourself, maybe enjoying yourself fine, but being removed from the give-and-

take matters of community.

Good spirituality is about being religious, about being connected to people, to other bodies, to other denominations, to friends and to strangers.

Tonight, I give thanks for bodies. For muscles and tendons and bones that are tied together in a magnificent Body of Christ. I also give thanks for the traditions and structures and routines that many of us will participate in this Thanksgiving. These are the flesh-and-blood ways we give thanks. And they are good things. They are religious things.

Yes, be spiritual this Thanksgiving! Give thanks in your heart and soul.

But, also be religious. Connect your spirituality with another body of flesh and blood. Be connected. Join a community of faith. Healthy spirituality is always connected. Healthy spirituality is always religious.

AMEN.

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