

“Leaving behind religion”  
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by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When I was a child, I once overheard my father burp... I know... this an odd beginning to a sermon, but stick with me... My dad didn't realize anyone was around, so he didn't say anything. Unfortunately for him, I had heard the burp and said, "You're supposed to say, 'Excuse me.'" My father smiled and said, "I didn't know anyone was listening," to which I replied, haughtily, "Dad, God is *always* listening." I was five years old. And yeah, if you're wondering, I was a bit of a pious snot as a kid.

So when I say that I understand Paul, you know that I'm telling the truth, because I'm a lot like him. I'm a baptized Presbyterian raised by Presbyterians, with a great grandfather as a Presbyterian pastor. I sang in the children's choir, went to Sunday school, was confirmed a Presbyterian, elected an elder at just 15 years old, and am famous for having given what I believe is still the longest statement of faith ever to be spoken in my home congregation.

I was religious in every way. And yet the one thing that mattered most I did not have. I didn't believe—at least not deep down—that God loved me. I didn't believe that I was worthy of love. I thought I had to claw my way into God's heart. Truth is, for all my religion, I still didn't know God.

Neither did Paul. He too was religious in all the right ways. He was an Israelite by birth, a member of God's chosen people. In *Harry Potter* terms, he was no "mudblood"; he was the son of two Hebrew parents, with not a drop of Gentile blood in him. He was the perfect Pharisee. He followed all the rules and strictly observed the Law. He was an exemplar of religion.

But it wasn't enough. Looking back on his former self, the Apostle Paul now says he counts it all as rubbish. He'd give it all up for one moment of knowing God.

I wonder how many of us here are like Paul before his encounter with Christ. I wonder how many of us truly believe that God loves us, that God is here with us, as close and as real as the air in our lungs.

We may be religious in all the right ways, but if we do not have that, it is all for naught.

Religion is like a house we've built for God. It's wallpapered with beliefs that help us speak about God. It's filled with symbols to help us remember God. In it we perform rituals to worship God. It is a place for us to gather as a family, learn and grow. It is a warm and good place to be. We are fed and cared for here. And as such, this house has value. At least it does, until we try to lock the doors. Until we try to limit God to these four walls. Until we forget that this house is just a stopping place along our travels; it is not the goal, but is only a halfway house on the way to something far greater.

The mistake is that we have come to confuse the house with God.

And it is in understanding this mistake that I believe we will begin to comprehend why we lost a generation of Christians.

There are many reasons of course. But one of those reasons is that people began to notice that there was something missing in church. We, like Paul, were religious in all the right ways. We came to church. We sent our children to Sunday school. We followed the rules and didn't make waves. But waves were exactly what people eager for Christ wanted. They wanted a faith that would tear open their lives and set their hearts on fire, sending them out into the world. They wanted more than stale bread; they wanted the *living* body of Christ. They wanted more than predictable services of worship; they wanted amazement, and mission, and sacrifice. But quickly they learned that Christianity had become more about the outward trappings of religion than the inward transformation of the soul.

The tragic irony of religion is that what once was the vehicle for faith becomes, through atrophy, the enemy of faith. Religion becomes rigid, intent on self-preservation, orthodoxy, and boundary-keeping, more interested in status and institutions and the past. Given enough time, the house of God becomes a prison for God.

So, what do we do? Well, what did Jesus do? He proclaimed freedom to the captives. So I'm going to say something you may never have expected to hear from the pulpit: give up religion. Leave it behind. Let it go.

This might sound like heresy, if it weren't for the fact that Paul said it first.

As translated by The Message, Paul writes, "Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung... I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power" (Phil. 3:7-11).

It was a spiritual experience on a road, a vision of Christ himself, that transformed Paul and led him to go beyond religion and embrace faith, to come face to face with God, to walk the Way.

Paul has an awakening. He hears words long ago utter by the Psalmist (Ps. 108), and now today sung by a well-known British band. [Play Mumford and Sons' song "Awake, My Soul."]

This is what Paul wants. Not a house to grow sleepy in, but a wide open sky to wake his soul, to rouse him to the majesty of God. Paul wants to be in love. And he wants to know that he is loved—saved, resurrected, by love.

Isn't that what we want also?

The irony is that once we unbar the doors of the house we call religion, once we are no longer trying to keep all the rules and prove ourselves to God and others, once we open ourselves to the unbounded and unorthodox Mystery of God, once we see that this house is just a house, albeit a

good one—that is precisely when religion comes alive and serves its purpose. Then, we are empowered to faithfully walk with God, alongside and through religious institutions, but not confined by them, or in service of them.

So maybe, we don't have to let go of religion after all—not if we are willing to hold it loosely.

It's then that we will know that religion has value, but it is not the goal. The great I Am is the goal. The great Mystery, the source of Love and Being, the full and absolute conviction that we are loved and empowered to share that love like seeds on the wind—that is the goal.

What might that look like for the church? St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles dared to find out. Its size was dwindling. It was desperately trying to return to its glory days and stay alive. But then its pastor, Anna Olson, asked, What would happen if we just let go, if we stopped trying to survive, if we just had fun and followed our faith?

The first thing they did was walk outside their doors and get to know their neighborhood. They walked through their community, observing the streets and houses, getting to know the people—their joys, their talents, their needs, their religious expressions, their lives. They looked for God out there.

Then they started saying “Yes” as much as they could, trying new things and seeing where they led. They didn't try to do everything. And they didn't hang their future on these new projects. They weren't last ditch efforts to survive. This was just about giving in to the Spirit and seeing where She led. They opened up their land and building for the community. A community group started a vegetable garden for local families. A couple men started a dance group for kids that practiced in the church parking lot. The church established a shrine for their Latino neighbors, a shrine for the Virgin of Guadalupe—it didn't exactly fit their theology or religious expression, but that was OK, because they had left that behind. They invited a group of graffiti artists from the community to spray paint the walls of the church—walls once carefully protected. They started unlocking and opening the doors of the church every day.

Not everything worked. But that was OK. Because they were having fun. They were in the presence of God. They were discovering the power of resurrection in their lives. And they were in love.

May it be so for us all.

**Amen.**