

“Extremely Religious”

Acts 17:22-31; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21; Psalm 66:8-20 04-27-08

Have you ever known someone who was “extremely religious” by his or her own account? How have you felt in that person’s presence? Edgy? Judged? Guilty? Less than you should be? It is often uncomfortable to be around someone who wears their religion on their sleeve and who tries to press it on you while making you feel less a child of God than they are.

I have had acquaintances who have made me shudder a bit when I have seen them approaching knowing that there will be some strange theological discussion that will take place. I understand that they mean well and that they only want to “save me” from my misguided views. If I can’t find a place to run away to and hide until they pass by, I patiently listen to them. I have learned that to argue with them is futile. They come armed with a complete set of biblical quotations and never stop firing them at me until I yell, “Uncle.” They never seem to buy the fact that I am happy they have found their own spiritual path as I have found mine and that we need to respect one another’s journeys. When they finally leave me alone I realize that it is fortunate that no other human can be my judge, that task is left up to a God who loves and cherishes each of us.

Paul, looking around himself in Athens, discovered a group of people who believed they were “extremely religious.” He told them he could see they were. This term, “extremely religious” meant that they were “addicted to the worship of many gods.” Their religion was not of the kind written on their hearts and souls but displayed through statues and gods made of gold. They needed something they could point to when necessary. But, to make sure they had all their bases covered they also proclaimed an “unknown god.”

This atmosphere must have disturbed Paul, a new believer in the way of Christ, for he believed that God had been made known to all through Jesus. The Athenians were an inquiring, curious group of people. They were willing to be somewhat open-minded and to explore other religious concepts, so they listened to him hoping to gain some insight into the new and foreign faith Paul was espousing. Some chose to join him in this new way, while others turned away. It was a time of spiritual confusion and a time when many were searching.

There is really nothing new in all of this. In our day and age there is a lot of spiritual confusion. Many people are searching. Some turn toward Christianity while others do not. Some choose to explore Eastern religions and find great comfort in their contemplative ways. Others examine Native American practices. Some try out Kabbalah, while others delve into ancient esoteric beliefs. I believe, as I know many of you do, that there is nothing wrong with this, we all need to search for what it is we can believe in and then embrace it. Quite often, after searching, we discover that we might have an interesting blend of several different faith systems. We take a bit of this and a bit of that and incorporate it all into our basic faith structure. This is not a bad thing, it shows that we are thinking as we search and that we are open to expanding our concepts.

We must exercise caution so that we don’t ever become so zealous about our particular brand of faith that we deny others the right to have their own. If we become

overbearing, we turn into the people others dread to see coming. As someone told me the other day, "It's all the same God." And as I have been heard to say about the divisions in Christianity, "The content is the same, while the formats differ." We are all searching for greater enlightenment and a better understanding of our faith and what it means to us in the living of our lives.

In the days of Paul, when he was busy carrying the Jesus movement throughout the Mediterranean area and establishing small house churches here and there, a mixture of faiths were encountered. He tried to convince those he taught that the best way for them was to follow Jesus. The interpretation allowed of the "good news" he shared with others was narrow. When any movement begins the guidelines for its development are rather strict. As the movement grows and a wider variety of people want to be included, a little flexibility is allowed to keep things moving and alive. Paul helped to expand his new faith beyond the Jewish audience for which it was originally intended by adding such flexibility.

Sometimes narrow views of Christianity seem to omit its basis, that of love. Love is to be the focal point of our practice and love is to move us forward to a greater understanding of the way God operates, or tries to, in and among us. When love is left out we tend to become judgmental of others and we tend to forget to cut them some slack if they do not seem to believe exactly the way we do.

Jesus speaks of love in the gospel of John. He tells those who followed him that they need not fear life when he would no longer be beside them. If they could remember what it was he taught them they would stay together bound by their love for him, one another and God. He would not leave them comfortless for an Advocate would come along to help them continue in their journey where he had left off. This Advocate or Counselor would be the Holy Spirit. Love was what made the early Christian world go round and it was the element that was meant to sustain it.

I am sure this confused those who loved him and who followed him. They did not understand that he was going to leave them and they probably could not completely grasp the concept of the Holy Spirit coming to them to help them carry on. They were being forced to broaden their spiritual pathway and understand a new abstract way of thinking. This was why the early years of the Jesus movement were so tenuous and so open to destruction. While others had their little gods of gold to look at and hold on to, the early disciples had nothing to compare. And, yet, they, for the most part moved forward defending their fledgling faith against mighty odds.

Now, the task is in our hands. It is up to us to nurture the kernel of "good news" we carry and to reveal it to those around us. The way we always seem to do this the best is through the example of our lives lived in kindness, understanding, patience and love. It is not done through being "extremely religious." Our faith is revealed through the care we show to others and the space we open to them for their own growth in the Spirit. Inch by inch we are doing this, day by day we are moving forward. Not in giant steps but in the way shown to us by Jesus, Paul and all those early followers as we seek to bring about the Kingdom of God in our midst.

-- Amen