

The Story—Again – Philippians 2:1-13

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The story is told by Rev. Lillian Daniel, a pastor in the United Church of Christ, of a man she encountered who told her about his faith.

“I’m spiritual but not religious,” he said. “I want to give you my testimony about why I do not attend church.”

“Like many Americans, this man had made several stops in the religious marketplace. He was raised a Catholic but felt injured by that tradition. His questions weren’t answered or welcome by the church, he said, and the worship, rituals and preaching seemed irrelevant.

“While he was in the army he was drawn to a conservative Baptist church. He joined that church because he liked the people who were in it, and he accepted Christ as his personal savior. But later he realized that the church held all sorts of strict moral beliefs that he could not adhere to, the worst of which was a prohibition on dancing. What kind of God would not want me to use my body to move? he wondered. He drifted away from that church.

“After marrying, he joined the church in which his wife was brought up, a mainline Protestant church. He described that experience as the equivalent of getting a big warm hug. This church did not frown on dancing and drinking nor on his theological questions. He was encouraged to think critically about scripture. His questions, even his doubts, did not shock anybody. In fact, he was told that his questions made him a very good mainline Protestant.

“But his marriage ended, and he began to feel that the church was more his former wife’s than his. He found himself spending Sunday mornings sleeping in, reading the *New York Times* or putting on his running shoes and taking off through the woods. This was his religion today, he explained. “I worship nature,” he said. “I see myself in the trees and in the cicadas. I am one with the great

outdoors. I find God there. And I realized that I am deeply spiritual but no longer religious.”

Lillian Daniel was not shocked or upset to hear this story. Nor is any other preacher shocked when hearing such a tale. You see, we’ve heard this so many times over the years that we can almost fill in the details before they’re told to us. It is a self-made religion that finds its appeal in being able to shape a new story whenever the believer wants to.

Part of the appeal also in this spiritual-but-not-religious theology is the desire to find something new all the time. There’s a sense among some of these folks that if they’ve experienced two or three different traditions over their lifetimes that they’ve then “been there, done that.” It becomes repetitious and boring.

There was once a family new to a church whose child had only a year of Sunday School under his belt. At a rehearsal for his second Christmas pageant, the boy cried out in indignation, “Do you mean to tell me we’re doing exactly the same story we did last year?”

“In a world that demands that everything be a one-time-only original production, the church remains a place to remember that there is someone much better than we are at original creations.”

(Daniel, *Christian Century*)

As much as we might try, we can’t come up with a new story every week on our own that can match the same mesmerizing, transforming tale that we gather around each other to hear on Sundays. And it’s a story that the world-wide church is proclaiming on this Sunday, World Communion Sunday.

There is still no better, more compelling story than that of the one “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

That's a story we can't create for ourselves. And our best efforts at coming up with a more exciting version through some sort of personal spirituality will always fall short.

You see, a key tenant of the "spiritual but not religious" movement is the ability, people believe they have, to enjoy the benefits of God without all the baggage. In a walk through nature or on the golf course or in the recliner with our newspapers on Sunday mornings, we can feel grateful. And certainly feeling grateful is a key part of our theology. But in that setting, the gratitude we feel doesn't lead us anywhere.

If we're a part of a community of believers, however, that sense of good fortune or blessedness would then naturally lead us to take action to help those who don't feel blessed. Hearing together on Sundays from the pulpit the wonderful words of Paul about how Christ emptied himself for us sparks us to act together so that others might come to know this old, old but wonderful story.

Oh, organized religion! It has its downfalls and drawbacks. Namely, the people! Isn't that the main reason why so many stay away from the church? It's those sinful people. This is really the crux of the problem that the spiritual-but-not-religious people have with church. If we could just kick out all the humans, we might be able to meet their high standards!

The old, old, wonderful story of Jesus only takes on its magnificent tone, though, when the checkered and diverse people of God gather as its intended audience. This is the humanity that Christ emptied himself for: "the guy singing out of tune next to you in your pew, the woman who doesn't have access to a shower and didn't bathe before worship, the baby screaming and the mother who doesn't seem to realize the baby is driving everyone crazy, the same mother who crawled out an inch from her postpartum depression to get herself to church today and wonders if there is a place for her there, the woman sitting next to her, who grieves that she will never give birth to a child and eyes that baby with envy, and the teenager who came to church all alone seeking something more than gratitude

and who gets caught up in the beauty of something bigger than his own invention.

“And suddenly it hits that teenager: I don’t need to invent God, because God has already invented me. I don’t need to make all this up for myself. There’s a community of folks who over thousands of years have followed a man who was willing to die alongside them, and he was raised from the dead to show there is much more to life than you could possibly come up with on your own.” (Daniel, *Christian Century*)

That’s the magnificence of this story of Jesus: Christ emptying himself for all of us.

This coming Tuesday, I’ll gather, along with my sons, the rest of my family, and many friends, at the American Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa. It’s the same church I was baptized in in 1970. A few of the people who attended worship that day fifty-some years ago, will be in attendance. In that same space where I was marked with water to indicate my identity as a child of God, we will witness to the resurrection of Jesus and give thanks to God for it as we remember and give thanks for my father, who died this past Wednesday.

That building has changed some in the last half century, but it’s the same building. And the story we will hear that day is the same too: Christ emptied himself, died and rose again. And with Christ, so too shall the saints rise in glory.

That’s the same story that has been told for thousands of years. It can’t be made better. It stands alone in its significance.

Spiritual but not religious. All of us probably think of ourselves in this category for fleeting moments now and again. But the story of Jesus and who he is and what he’s done pulls us back again into this body, the church, because it’s the one story that can rally us together, one story that can never be topped.