

"I Believe in Organized Religion"
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I believe in organized religion. I figured I would just get that out of the way at the beginning like ripping off a band-aid all at once. Believing in organized religion is not the most popular stance, even amongst those who practice it, and with Larry and Sandy at the helm, we at UCG practice some of the most organized religion around. This week, while the other ministers were away, the air conditioning maintenance person came to switch out the filters. He happened to see me first, and he said "They say there are 28 filters I need to change on 11 different systems, and I don't know where any of them are." So I said, "Let me introduce you to Alyson." But before he had even finished telling her about the 28 filters, she pulled out a map labeled "map of filters" with 28 red dots on it. That is organized religion.

I believe in organized religion, and I am preaching on organized religion not because I assume you agree, but knowing that many of you may not. I've been told that our "This I Believe" sermon series grew out of something I said while I was interviewing here at UCG. After about 12 hours of interviewing, the committee asked me, "Is there anything you'd like to ask us?" What I said was that after talking about God however known all day, I wished we could go around the circle and each person could say how they know God. I think that kind of sharing is essential for the experiment in faith that is UCG. We must share our beliefs, even when and especially when we disagree. Only when we have the courage to share and to disagree in love does our diversity here have meaning and value. Any group of people can ignore one another, but here we seek to understand each other.

So, for my part, I believe in organized religion, but that doesn't mean I don't understand the arguments that others make against it. Our scripture this morning, for instance, suggests much of what is wrong with organized religion. In this simple story of a dreaming man, the seeds of Western history and tragedy are contained. The strange and seemingly inconsequential act of pouring oil on a stone anticipates the building of the temple of Jerusalem and its destruction, the grand but empty cathedrals of Europe, and the mega-churches of America. Jacob's promise to give a tenth of all he has to God, paves the way for the medieval Church's selling of indulgences; paves the way for the French Revolution, spurred on by the Church's taxes on crops; and paves the way for the financial scandals of modern televangelists, promising salvation for a pledge. A contemporary audience cannot read Jacob's request for God's support without thinking of the prosperity gospel preached by Joel Osteen and others, which justifies the abundance enjoyed by rich Americans as a gift of God, and suggests that the poor are simply getting in the way of God's desire to prosper them. Nor can we read God's promise of land to Jacob without reflecting on the territorial wars in that tiny region which have lasted from his time into our own.

There is much to disdain and distrust in this short story, much to regret in its legacy to us. But I believe there is also a lot that makes sense in Jacob's actions. If we hold off from blaming him for the next 3000 years of Judeo-Christian history, I think we can see that what Jacob does in that desert is not monstrous, or ignorant, or even strange. After all, it's just a little

dream work, and I'm sure no one here will fault him for that. Jacob has an encounter in his dream, an encounter with ultimate reality, with God, with truth, and the actions he takes come out of that encounter. I believe in Jacob, and I believe in organized religion, because I believe that the fundamental truth we discover must be marked, must be shared, and must be lived.

Jacob has an encounter with God, an experience of ultimate reality, of fundamental truth, and he wants to mark it. He discovers something which he believes to be true and powerful, and he wants to remember it, to set it aside. He wakes shaken, saying, "How awesome is this place!" He turns his pillow over on its side, and pours oil over it, so that when the sun bakes the oil on, the rock will remain marked. Like a trail of breadcrumbs in the forest, Jacob sets up a pillar to remind himself of the journey on which he has been traveling.

I believe in Jacob's decision, because I believe that when we experience something true we should mark it. Those of you who have met UCG member Bill Lassiter may be able to guess why I'm hitching up my robe right now. What you can see, if you are close enough and brave enough to look, are Bill's Rumper Stickers. The left cheek says "God is still speaking" and the right one says "Perfect is the Enemy of Good Enough." He didn't give me one for Satchel's. Bill has a whole line of Rumper Stickers that speak to truths that he has discovered. If you ever say something clever to Bill, you may soon find it on someone's rumper. Rumper stickers and bumper stickers and tattoos and printed T-shirts are some of the ways we mark our truths, mark those moments of revelation, those experiences of power. We keep anniversaries and birthdays and perform weddings and funerals; we write plays, and journal entries, and poems; we paint, and sculpt, and sing; we start museums and keep records and make home movies because we know that those profound moments must be set aside, remembered, even made sacred.

Yet, when Jacob sets up his pillar, it is not only for himself, but for all those who pass that way, all those wandering in the desert who might need a place to sleep, a place to dream, all those who might just encounter God. This is where some of us begin to get nervous about organized religion. We live in a culture which encourages us to keep our beliefs to ourselves. Having experienced those who would impose their beliefs on us, we are very careful not to suggest that our truth must also be true for someone else. But, I believe in Jacob's decision, because I believe that great truth, like great art or great food, cries out to be shared. A good meal, we are content to keep for ourselves, but a great meal inspires us to say, "You have to taste this!" There are passages we underline just for ourselves, and there are books we press, dogeared, into friends' hands saying, "You have to read this!" Great plays must be performed, artwork displayed, museums visited. Great truth bubbles up, it burns holes in our pockets, it magnetizes us, drawing others in. There are small truths we can keep to ourselves, but there are others that we cannot and must not hold back.

Yet even great truth is only so important. A meal is eaten, a play is seen, a museum is visited, and they become memories. What Jacob experiences he believes to be a fundamental truth, that truth which goes to the very core of our existence, which explains us to ourselves, which reveals to us the presence of God. So Jacob is not content to simply mark the truth or even to share the truth, but he decides to live the truth, decides to live differently because of what he has experienced. I believe in Jacob's actions, because I believe such truths, when we discover them, must be lived.

And this is where it gets really tricky. I asked Sanford to share the story of UCG's

decision to buy a building, because I think it expresses that tricky part about organized religion, the difficult work of taking a moment of truth and putting it into day to day practice, the tricky part that keeps us from getting too excited when we hear Jacob's story. We know what's coming. When I got here I began to read through the history of UCG in the book *Open to the Spirit*. As I read, I couldn't help but get excited by the stories of the beginnings of this awesome place. Bob Atkins writes at the beginning of the book, "In 1963 or early 1964, one UF entomologist talking with another said he thought Gainesville should have a new kind of church." It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but behind the matter-of-factness of Bob's words, I hope you can feel the excitement of a wild idea taking hold. There is such energy and idealism in those early letters and essays, so much wonderful energy, and one gets the feeling that an entire group of people are caught up in a dream, collectively experiencing the presence of God. It is as if every meeting were an all-night conversation in a freshman dorm room. And I can't imagine that no one said, "How awesome is this place!"

Beginnings are exciting, whether they are the beginnings of churches, or the beginnings of careers, or the beginnings of relationships. Something has reached out and touched us, grabbed us: a new passion, a new love, a new kind of church, and we can feel ourselves being transformed. Those moments of presence, of energy, of difference are the moments which give direction and purpose to our lives, the moments that fuel our journeys. They are moments which can stop us in our tracks and send us moving out in a new direction. They are exciting moments, watershed moments, essential moments, but they are not eternal moments. They do not last, and they leave no trail. And if we are not careful we can even forget them.

On September 11th, 2001 I was living on 5th Avenue in New York City. The planes which brought down the towers buzzed right over my dorm room. What I remember from the days that followed those horrific events was the change which came over New York. Everyone had experienced something profound, something awful, but in our common sadness and shock we also experienced something amazing and beautiful. A city in which people generally ignore one another began to smile, to say good morning, to laugh with one another. People lined up for hours to give blood, strangers held one another in the streets, and an entire city changed...for a few days. I remember walking down to ground zero with a friend about a week after the attack and sharing my secret wish for things to stay the way they were, for all 8 million of us to find a way to make the change permanent, to find a way to harness that truth and power we experienced and to be different with one another. Even a week later, I could feel the city slipping back into normalcy, and I was disappointed. This profound experience of truth, this renewed knowledge of our essential humanity, of our fundamental unity was fleeting.

If we mark them, and if we share them, then these experiences of fundamental truth may continue to work on us, and they may even change the way we live. But there is danger in that as well. Like the early members of UCG who worried that their new kind of church would become like any other if they gave into the edifice complex, we know too well the history of religions, the temptation to lose connection from that fundamental reality which brought people together. When people no longer come to church because of an experience of power or truth but because it is the right thing to do or a politically important place to be, that is when religion becomes dangerous. When we forget why we are here it only takes a charismatic someone with ulterior motives, to move us in the wrong direction. Religion itself becomes idolatrous when it ceases to be about fundamental things, when it ceases to refer to deepest

truth, to connect people with true power.

In his "This I Believe" statement, the author, Wallace Stegner, wrote, "Everything potent, from human love to atomic energy, is dangerous; it produces ill about as readily as good; it becomes good only through the control, the discipline, the wisdom with which we use it." Religion is potent stuff, but I believe its danger is not in its potency so much as in those times when its potency is forgotten or taken for granted, when its practitioners go about their religion disconnected from its truth. I believe religion at its best is natural stuff, inevitable stuff, because I believe that at its best, religion is about an encounter: an encounter with truth, an encounter with God. It is about an encounter which shows us a little of who we are and what we are doing here. I believe such an encounter must be marked, must be shared, must be lived. Perhaps the greatest shame about organizing religion is that it becomes a thing called "religion" at all, instead of simply being called "life." This is what I believe religion is meant to signify, that which is fundamental to life, that which speaks to its meaning and its source. This is the work of faith, and while it is always carried out imperfectly, still I believe.