

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 1/3/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, January 4 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for God's intervention in the fires in Colorado. Ask for reduction in the winds and protection for those fighting the fires. Pray for aid, both human and divine, for those who have lost homes and are struggling because of the fires.*

In my previous article, I talked a bit about the 30% of Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated. For some that means no religious beliefs or connection whatsoever. For others, though, it means that they identify as spiritual, but not religious. I also explained that for many of these spiritual-but-not-religious people, they are very spiritual individuals, but have rejected organized religion because of how they have been treated by the church for what some in the church deem “unchristian” behavior or choices, or for how they see some churches treating certain groups in our world. They frankly have seen some pretty unchristian Christianity. Certainly, there is much debate about what is Christian and what isn't, about who is in and who is out, and about who God loves and who God rejects. Rather than talk about that here, I want to consider how we might respond to those who make this claim of being spiritual but not religious.

Perhaps you know some who identify this way. Perhaps you've been trying to bring someone with the spiritual-but-not-religious identity to church. It can be frustrating because they seem to have some good arguments for not worshiping with a congregation. Some will say they sense God's presence in nature. Others will say they just can't support or affiliate with churches that abuse others. Some will say that they can worship on their own without the church.

A story is told about a farmer who quit coming to church. On a cold, snowy evening, the pastor came to visit that man and encourage him to return. They talked for some time, with the man insisting that he had his Bible, his hymns to which he could listen, and that he could pray at home. He didn't need the church.

Finally, in frustration, the pastor got up and took the tongs from beside the fireplace, reached into the fire with them, and removed a hot ember from the fire. He gently set it on the side of the hearth and sat back down. Quietly, the two men watched the ember. As time progressed and the fire continued to burn brightly, the ember slowly dimmed and went out.

The farmer looked at the pastor and said, “I'll see you next Sunday.”

There is truth to the need to be in relationship with other believers. We need to recognize that, not only do we need their company, but they also need ours. Each time we add our voice to that of other believers, our worship is richer and more meaningful. We benefit from them and they benefit from us.

But, for those who believe in God, but who choose not to attend worship, I think there is an important question which we can ask them. Very simply, the question is, “Where are you hearing God's love

proclaimed to you?" It is one thing to believe God loves you. It is another to hear that message announced to you. Again, one of the reasons that some leave the church is because the message they have heard is that God does not love them. That message is wrong. The testimony of Jesus is that God loves everyone. Sadly, too often, some churches have gotten mixed up on that and come to believe that there are some whom God does not love. Try to find that in the words of Jesus, though. God loves us all and wants to be in relationship with us. And God wants us to hear that message of unconditional love regularly and frequently. One of the best ways we can do that is by attending worship in a church that is flawed, sometimes in error, but nevertheless, dearly loved and claimed by God. And that is a message we can share with those who are not actively attending worship.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey