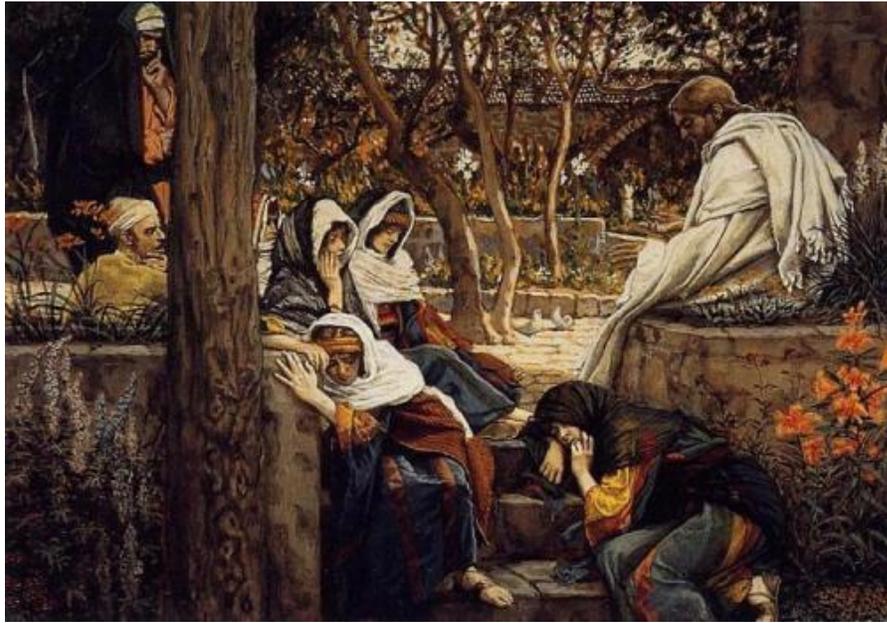


"The Danger of Isolation"



Part V of the 2025 Lenten Sermon Series
"What is the Value and Importance of Being Religious?"

This is, thank God, now the fifth and final sermon in a series which I have been preaching this Lent, exploring in the face of increasing "nones" in America, those who choose 'none of the above' as religious preference, what, if any, value or importance is there then in being a "religious" person today. The rise of the "nones" in this country, as we saw in that first sermon, was sudden and explosive, starting only in the 1990's when the national percentage of "nones" rose from its long term trendline of about 7% of the American population to a surprising 25% to 35% today, swelling this much in only 25 or so years! The reasons for this were many, we saw, but were primarily thought

to be the end of the Cold War, the rise of the religious right and the Moral Majority, and the introduction of the internet and the Information age. So today, many people claim to be "spiritual," but not "religious," which for most of them simply means that they abandoned the religion of their upbringing and now distrust "organized religion" itself, if not all institutions in general. That has caused many to wonder whether religions will survive in the future? And why in this modern scientific age of ours have they lasted as long as they have?

In the second sermon in this series we saw that there seems to be something inherent in our biological make-up as humans that creates so-called 'religious thinking,' good for our social bonding and our survival as a species. Thus, before we get to any specifics of creeds and doctrines of organized religions, we find that we have this unique ability among primates to remove ourselves from the immediate objective reality of our lives, and to imagine alternative scenarios, different possibilities, even other worlds, even unseen forces like gravity or invisible beings like fairies or demons, which we see has then lead us to science, literature, and religion in some form or another, as found in every known human civilization. Thus, religions are likely to persist.

So, in the third sermon in the series, I asked the simple question "Can you go to church and not believe?" There we saw

how this attraction to religious gatherings may differ from person to person, as different aspects of worship resonant with us or not, but also our attraction rarely has to do with the so-called established creeds and doctrines of this or that group. What seems to bring us together are our religious questions, not our religious answers. Most of us gather because of our inherent desire for community.

In the fourth sermon in this series, we saw how we actually need community, how we need each other in order to be healthy, both physically and psychologically. There we focused then on the necessary skills needed to build, to enlarge, and to strengthen our communities, skills in which we are often reluctant to engage, but are vital to well-being as a society.

So, in our world today, we see that there are four big forces coursing through our modern societies. 1) Global migration, which is leading to dramatic demographic diversity. 2) Economic globalization, which is creating wider opportunity, but also greater inequality among socio-economic classes. 3) The Internet, which is giving people more choices over what to buy and what to pay attention to. 4) And our culture of autonomy, which celebrates individual choice and self-determination.

All of these forces have liberated the individual, but they have been a disaster for wider community-building, and for our national cohesion, and for the strengthening of our social

fabric. Income inequality challenges economic cohesion as the social classes divide up and isolate themselves, which I know so well from my time in Bridgeport. Demographic diversity challenges cultural cohesion as different ethnic groups rub against one another, and we as a society more often divide up from one another into our different tribes of like-minded peoples. Thus, our current cultural emphasis on individual choice now challenges our community cohesion and our established social bonds.

The weakening of the social fabric has created a whole range of problems for us today, as there are significant dangers in our cultural isolation. Alienated young men, we see, join gangs or militia or ISIS so they can have a sense of belonging. Isolated teenagers shoot up schools. Many people grow up in fragmented, disorganized neighborhoods. Families break apart and separate, while Political polarization is growing more and more as people often these days don't even interact with those on the other side, all of which exasperates our social differences and cultural tensions. And sadly, racial animosity stubbornly persists and indeed seems to be strengthening.

Odder still, people are often plagued by a sense of powerlessness in today's world, a loss of efficacy. The liberation of the individual was supposed to lead to mass empowerment. But it turns out, social scientists tell us, that

people can effectively pursue their own goals only when they know who they are – when they have firm identities.

Strong identities can come only when people are embedded in a rich social fabric, a diverse community with open dialogue and honest thought. Strong identities can also only come when we have defined social roles – like father, plumber, Little League coach. They arise only when we are seen and respected by our neighbors and loved ones in a certain way, scientists say. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds.”

You take away that rich social fabric and what you are left with is people who are fragile and uncertain about who they really are. It’s hard to live daringly when your very personal foundation is fluid and always at risk.

And since we’re not likely to roll back any of these four big forces coursing through modern societies, the question now is how to reweave the social fabric in the face of them, how do we create and sustain diverse communities which care for one another. In a globalizing, diversifying world, how do we preserve individual freedom while also strengthening social solidarity and building up our sense of community?

In her new book “Commonwealth and Covenant,” Marcia Pally of N.Y.U. and Fordham offers a clarifying concept, I think. What we want, she suggests, is “separability amid situatedness.” We

want to go off on our own and create and explore and experiment with new ways of thinking and living our own lives. We want to be masters of our own destiny. But we also want to be situated – embedded in loving families and caring communities, thriving within a healthy cultural infrastructure that provides us with values and goals and security. Small groups, as we have seen, are important to our social health and well-being, whether they be families, neighbors, or our communities.

Creating situatedness requires a different way of thinking, she writes. When we go out and 'do' a deal, we make a contract. But when we are 'situated' within something, it is because we have made a 'covenant', not a 'contract'. A contract protects interests, Pally notes, but a covenant protects relationships. A covenant exists between people who understand they are part of one another. It involves a vow to serve a relationship that is sealed in respect and love: Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people.

People in a contract provide one another with services, but people in a covenant delight in sharing their gifts with each other. Out of love of country, soldiers offer the gift of their service and often their lives. Out of love of education, teachers offer students the gift of their attention, despite the personal costs.

The social fabric needs to be thus rewoven in this religious or spiritual frame of mind, she concludes, with covenants, not contracts. During another period of national fragmentation, Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address aroused a refreshed love of country, by playing upon the mystic chords of memory and using the Declaration of Independence as a unifying scripture and guide, Palley notes.

These days the social fabric will only be repaired by hundreds of millions of people making local covenants, Palley insists, intentionally widening their circles of social connection and attachment across income, across social and racial divides, across cultures and diverse political views. We need to work hard to break out of our natural attraction to groups of like-minded people, tribes who look like us, think like us, and speak the same language as we do. It will probably also require our leaders drawing upon American history to revive patriotism, Palley continues. They'll tell a story that includes the old beloved themes --- and Religion, of course, is full of such stories and old themes! We need to remember that we're a universal nation, the guarantor of stability and world order for all people, she writes. We need to remember our pledge that "all men are created equal, with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But our current story line must transcend

the old narrative and offer an updated love of America and love of one another.

I would push here even further. We are not only a universal nation, but we as Christians are also a universal religion, that struggles to respect the dignity of every human being. We pledge to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Jesus, and we vow to seek and serve Christ then in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, welcoming the stranger into our midst, caring for refugees and foreigners, attending to the sick and suffering. We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people in our Baptismal Covenant, a covenant which we will once again reaffirm together at Easter, when we promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.

In the end, our world needs religion to heal our wounds and rebuilt our society, to stabilize our future in a fair and equitable way that befits the words and example of our Lord Jesus of Nazareth. We need to create, support, develop, and expand our local communities, our local congregations, until we are all one in a loving and respectful relationship with God and with each other. We may not always agree with one another, but we must strive to live together in grace and harmony. And therein lies the value and importance of being a religious person in the world today! AMEN.