

Religionless Christianity

On Sunday, we concluded our prophecy sermon series by exploring Isaiah 66.

1. Warm up question. An “oxymoron” is when you put two words together that seem contradictory. For example, Andy Warhol once described himself as “deeply superficial.” If you were going to use two contradictory words to describe your personality, what would they be?
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined history’s most famous spiritual oxymoron. After observing how most churches in Germany failed to resist the Nazis, Bonhoeffer found himself longing for something that would be more real and have more integrity. He dreamed of a day when the world would be blessed with “religionless Christianity.” The Nazis executed him before he could fully develop the concept, leaving us to try to imagine what “religionless Christianity” might look like. Our Scripture passage may offer some insights. Let’s read Isaiah 66:1-5.
3. Verses 1-2 remind us how great God is and warn us against our natural human tendency to want to put God in a box, i.e., a “house.” We have a tendency to think we can contain God in a temple and a religious system of rules, rituals, and dogmas. Isaiah reminds us that, no matter how much of God is revealed to us, there will still be so much more to learn.
 - a. Scientists tell us that everything we can see and feel around us represents less than 10% of what actually exists. Most of what exists, they say, we cannot perceive. They call these unseen substances “dark matter” and “dark energy.” When you hear that, what do you think or feel?
 - b. If we can only perceive less than 10% of God’s creation, how much of the truth about God do you think we humans can perceive, and what are the implications of that?
 - c. Scientists tell us that a single handful of soil scooped up in the forest contains at least 10 billion bacteria, one million plum yeasts, 200 thousand hairy little fungi know as molds, 10,000 protozoans, 300 tiny spiders, as well as assorted flatworms, roundworms, and other microscopic creatures. In short, soil is a miracle. All of creation is a miracle. What aspect of creation most drives home to you the infinite greatness and “otherness” of God?
4. In an effort to understand God as much as possible, the Israelites did what all religious people do. They built temples and established an elaborate system of religious rules, rituals, and dogmas. At the heart of their religion was a system of sacrifice. Yet Isaiah denounces that system of sacrifice. In verse three, he compares the sacrifices the Israelites were offering in the temple to crimes like killing people or breaking a dog’s neck.

- a. If God commanded these sacrifices in the Mosaic Code, why are they denounced here? Was it right or wrong for the Israelites to offer sacrifices?
 - b. What are the benefits of religious ritual and what are the dangers?
 - c. Can Holy Communion become a meaningless ritual? If so, how do we avoid that outcome?
5. If God doesn't want us mindlessly observing a bunch of religious rules and rituals, then what does God want? The answer is found in verses 4 and 2b.
 - a. According to verse 4, what was God's primary complaint against the Israelites?
 - b. According to verse 2b, what is the primary thing God wants from each of us?
 - c. Frank Rich says, "Listening to someone is so close to loving that when we are listened to we feel loved." Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Matthew 22:37. When we put those two quotes together, they lead to the conclusion that listening is the most important way to express our love for God. Do you buy that? Why or why not?
 - d. Jeff summed up Sunday's sermon this way: "Listening to the voice of God in my life is everything." What does it look like to live with a "listening spirit"? What does the opposite of a "listening spirit" look like?
 - e. Mark Twain once said, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." Tell us about a conviction you once held as absolutely true that you now have come to see differently. What changed your heart?
 - f. As you look back over recent days or weeks, when have you heard the voice of God speaking to you in some way large or small? How did you respond? What happened?
6. Verse 5 suggests that religious people will often despise people who have a "listening spirit." Why is that?
7. Based on all we've discussed, how would you define "religionless Christianity"?