

Duck Soup
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Nasruddin was a sufi mullah who lived during the the Middle Ages. One day, his cousin came to visit. As was the custom, the cousin brought Nasruddin a gift: a duck. The two of them made duck soup and ate together.

Word of the duck soup got around, and people came to Nasruddin's house, claiming to be a friend of his cousin's, thus obligating Nasruddin to feed them. After that, more came, so many that, at last, Nasruddin opened his door to a friend of a friend of his cousin.

This man sat down, for soup, and Nasruddin served him a bowl of steaming water. The man promptly asked, What is this?

To which the mullah answered, That is the soup of the soup of the duck that was brought to me by the friend, of your friend, my cousin. The soup of the soup for the friend of the friend ...

In the Catholic and Anglican traditions, we emphasize the concept of Apostolic Succession. Apostolic succession means this: your clergy - priests and deacons - stand in direct lineage to Peter.

Each priest has had hands laid on him by another priest/bishop who had someone lay hands on him, who had someone lay hands on him ... and so on, back to Peter.

A little like being descended from someone on the Mayflower - or being a Son or Daughter of the American Revolution. Does either status make one a better American?

Does Apostolic Succession make one a better priest?

Does walking into a church make one a better Christian?

In fact, moral theologians have long recognized that some people who claim to follow Christ do not do so very well.

Lay and clergy, too - even popes, reading the church's sordid history, have not led exemplary lives.

Moral theologians distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is the institutional structure, but the visible church is not the real church.

The real church is the invisible church - the community of people who donate themselves humbly in faith to God, and to one another.

Someone crassly put it this way: walking into a church makes you a Christian about as much as walking into a barn makes you a horse.

You don't get Duck Soup because you are a friend of a friend of the cousin, you get hot water.

In truth, most American Christians couldn't care less about arcane religious concepts like apostolic succession. People care more about the functionality of the church.

Put another way, people are asking the institutional church, "What have you done for me lately?"

I suspect so many people leave the mainline churches because of the answer to that question: not much. People want duck soup; they don't want hot water. People want the real thing, not a watered down substitute.

Oliver Thomas who wrote the book, "10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell you (But Can't Because He Needs the Job)" - ya gotta like that title -- also published an insightful column in USA Today, this week. In the column, Thomas claims people want something different from church these days, and the implication is: for church to survive, it must meet some contemporary need people have. Not exist for its own sake.

Thomas is not talking about the liturgical style of our services, but rather, our arcane doctrine. For example, the Southern Baptist tradition places great emphasis on the concept, washed in the blood.

Two thousand years ago, common people understood the purpose of animal sacrifice and the role blood played in society. Many of them would have been familiar with cult of Mithras, in which devotees literally washed themselves in

the blood of bulls. The cult no longer exists; nor does routine animal sacrifice. Hence, being washed in the blood is arcane and has little contemporary meaning, absent careful translation.

Instead, Thomas claims American Christians want two things out of their religious life: worship and belonging.

I think Thomas is right.

It isn't that the arcane concepts won't translate to twenty-first century sensibilities, it is that they require translation.

But worship and belonging, now those are concepts we can sink our teeth into.

Worship - means returning worth or value. We worship that which is valuable to us. A person finds God to be valuable by experiencing the gift of grace that God, tangibly in Christ Jesus, gives to each of us.

That gift commonly finds its form in acceptance. You wake-up one day and realize God accepts you completely, loves you completely, has lavished upon you the very breath of life, and you are accepted.

God accepts you. Without condition.

That acceptance is the duck soup of the cousin, not its derivative, hot water.

The primary experience, this is why people return to church a second time. Which means that worship is simply your ordered response to beautiful love. You adore the God who adores you and join with others in expressing that adoration.

The Holy Spirit Jesus promised in the Gospel reading is the common spirit of worship - it is what brings us together and fills us communally with appreciation.

That same Holy Spirit makes possible the second of Thomas' values: belonging.

We come to belong to one another because we first belong to God. As lovers of God, we become lovers of one another. And create this lovely community.

Athens was the Berkeley of the day, the center of higher learning. In those days, being educated meant being religious. The more religious you were, the higher knowledge you had.

In our educated world, people claim to be spiritual but not religious.

In Athens, you could say people claimed to be religious, but not spiritual.

Paul pointed out the absurdity, religion without spirituality. Missing the essence behind it all, the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Who sustains this world with breath.

Paul tried to convince Athenians to become spiritual and religious.

Here, today, in Marin, I unabashedly proclaim, I am both spiritual and religious.

My being spiritual and religious has less to do with the institutional church and arcane religious concepts - such as apostolic succession - than it does this: I believe in experience, the experience of God - plus, I believe we give body - structure - to that spiritual experience. Together in worship.

I have experienced a love of a God that is complete. I have discovered that God accepts me as I am - with my wobbly faith and sincere doubts. That is spirituality.

I am religious because I need a method by which to exercise that spirituality. A home in which to place my spirituality.

So I worship alongside you. Which makes us lovers - together, lovers of God, lovers of one another, and lovers of this world that so desperately needs the same grace.

No - we don't eat the hot water, the duck soup of friends of the cousin, we eat the substantive, nourishing soup itself.