

Spirituality and Religion

Acts 6:1-7

April 23, 2017

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I wrote a parable this week. It goes like this. Lazarus owns a 1999 Dodge Neon, a car with a bit of Y2K disaster built right into its glovebox.

Lazarus' Neon, by popular acclaim, one of that year's "ten worst cars," is rusty. Its leaky oil pan has stained the driveway. The wheels are out of alignment. It doesn't have any get up and go. Foam stuffing is coming out of the seats.

One day, when the brakes feel especially spongy, Lazarus takes his Neon to the Nazareth Auto Repair shop. In a moment of carefree optimism Lazarus even asks the mechanics to also give the car a tune-up. It is a long time since the car has had a tune up. Forever, in fact. Some car owners are like that.

So the Nazareth mechanics go to work. They discover that the compression is way down in two cylinders. The spark plugs are still original equipment. The brakes need new rotors and discs all around.

In fact, the Nazareth Auto Repair mechanics finally tell Lazarus that the car isn't worth tuning up. It needs a resurrection. Repairs will cost at least 4,000 dollars, and that wouldn't even cover the upholstery or rust. The Nazareth mechanics advise Lazarus to buy another car, instead. They actually have a good used Toyota on their lot.

So Lazarus goes home to consider his options. And he decides that he doesn't trust the Nazareth mechanics. You see, he only trusts how he feels about cars—just as many of us only trust in our feelings about spirituality. In fact, Lazarus trusts his feelings more than he trusts the Nazareth Auto Repair shop's expertise—religion.

And that is how it is for the church. When it comes to faith—whether rusty or none at all—people tend to trust their intuitions, feelings, and whatever they last read on the internet more than they trust the church as a religious institution.

Of course, Lazarus' story is a parable. And I'm exaggerating when I say that people only trust their feelings when it comes to spirituality. I actually know some very thoughtful people who pursue personal spirituality rather than institutional religion. They've studied the great religious prophets like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King and maybe have even read the Upanishads or the Koran. They devote time and intellect to their spirituality.

But usually, when people say that they are spiritual but not religious, they make the claim based on their feelings and intuitions.

This is especially so, I think, for one key reason. We live in an era when most of us—whether we go to church or not—most of us are very skeptical about all institutions. We don't trust government institutions that go to war because we know that once upon a time they did not find weapons of mass destruction. They tax us, too much. They can't build the subways or transit or run Hydro the way such things should be done.

People are skeptical about institutions. Classrooms are too crowded. Persons of colour end up being carded or languishing in jail more than White folks. Banks push their own investment instruments rather than the best ones, and charge too much for doing so. Millennials can't find the jobs they trained for, and when they do find one, it's a "gig" rather than a career.

People are skeptical about institutions. They don't like them and don't trust them. So what are they supposed to do? Mostly, we cannot quit the institutions that are part of our daily lives. We can't take our money out of the bank and put it under a bed and then buy stuff on Amazon. We can't quit taking cars on government roads or public transit to work. We can't stop being citizens of Canada. Most institutions, whether we love them or hate them, can't be avoided.

So, to express their anti-institutional angst, one thing that many people do, often unconsciously, is leave those few institutions we can choose to leave. Like the church. People reject Nazareth Motors because it satisfies their longing to thumb their noses at an institution, any institution.

Well, I'm here this morning to say that, perhaps, we ought not make such a hasty decision. Churches actually can do—and do—amazing things, even though they have to organize institutionally to do so. Take, for example, today's scripture.

In the beginning, at the very start of the Jesus' new community, they encountered a problem. You see, idealists that they were, they had gotten into the habit of selling everything they had and sharing the cash with each as he or she had need. Not a system guaranteed to work for very long, but they did it with the best of intentions.

Except that some members of the church were overlooked in the distribution of the food. The early church did right by its Jewish members, but not by its non-Jewish gentile members. The Jewish members were well looked after, but the Greek-speaking widows went hungry.

To resolve this problem, the church organized itself, as institutions do. It organized itself religiously, in fact. It selected several men to make sure that money was shared fairly. And the amazing thing was that the church selected—we can tell by the names we read—the church selected only Greek-speaking men, the children of those hungry Greek-speaking women, to take over all the financial leadership of the church, for both Jews and Greeks.

Amazing. For us, it would be like putting only people with the biggest mortgages on the boards of banks. Like putting only homeless people on Toronto's City Council. Like only allowing First Nations people to work for the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs. Very idealistic. Irregular. Perhaps unworkable.

And yet this sort of risky, selfless, upside-down behaviour is actually what organized institutional religion, at its best, is all about. Churches are a time, a place and an opportunity for spiritual people to join hands with other spiritual people, learn together, and work together for the good of all humanity, even if at great personal cost.

So, for example, here at Lawrence Park Community Church, we work together to bring refugees to Canada, even when we know that it will cost us in time, big time, when they finally arrive. We contribute generously to fund Camp Scugog even though we don't personally know the impoverished kids who go there. We encourage our City Councillors and MPs to keep working for the least and the last even if it means more taxes. We insist together that our planet is a temple, we will do what it takes, politically and personally to keep it beautiful, even if it is our grandchildren rather than ourselves who will benefit. We inspire our bankers to work for shareholder profit and the common good, as they do. We remind each other that racism isn't just a matter of personal prejudice, but of systems that wed prejudice to power, systems that mostly white folks benefit from.

And of course, we wonder about and share our experiences of this sort of spirituality together: in worship, in committees, in council, in meditation classes—always together.

Sometimes we fail, too, even badly, as with our shared stewardship, with the government, of the residential schools. But at other times, we succeed spectacularly, as when the United Church of Canada, at great cost to itself, was the first major Canadian institution of any stripe to call for equal rights for gay people, or when we lead the charge—over and over again through the decades—to make Canada a welcoming home for refugees.

So spirituality is great. It is an inescapable human need, like exercise or food. But true and deep spirituality isn't merely a feeling or an intuition, it is rather the potential we all share to become both more deeply human, more like Christ or the Buddha, and more connected to each other and the divine, not solely for our private benefit, but for the good of all people.

The baptisms and confirmation we saw this morning are for spiritual people who recognize this truth, and so commit themselves and their children to a community where people prize spirituality and want to supersize it by working at it together, doing good things together.

The truth is, we all begin to sag, and rust, and slow down when we try to do spirituality merely as an intuition or gut feeling. It is hard to keep a private spirituality firing on all cylinders.

So what we all really need, to do spirituality right, to keep it in good repair, is check in at the Nazarene Repair shop, here at church, to tune it up.

And doing so is called religion.