

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**

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**Rev. John F. Koerner**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Clarksburg, WV**

**I Samuel 1:4-20**

*But Hannah answered, "No my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord." (I Samuel 1:15 N.R.S.V.)*

## **Spiritual But Not Religious**

One lover said to the other, "I love you so much I would walk through a burning room for you. . . . well, not really through fire, that would be dangerous. But I would walk through a really hot, humid room for you. . . . well not too humid. I mean, my hair, you know."

There is a growing movement around the world and in our country called SBNR, spiritual but not religious. A young woman on a hiking trail on Sunday morning might describe herself as SBNR, spiritual but not religious. A young man who says he loves Jesus, but hates the church might claim to be spiritual but not religious, SBNR. Studies show that 70% of young people in our country age 18 to 30, describe themselves as SBNR.

Popular books today talk about the death of the church and a new spiritual awakening. But this is a flawed perception. You can't have a growing spiritually without religion.

For many years the terms religion and spirituality have been interchangeable. Now many see them as separate. Religion and the church are often criticized as being about human rules and empty rituals. The church is perceived by many who claim to be SBNR as being too judgmental and condemning and also as being irrelevant to today's world.

There is some truth to the criticism of the church and organized religion. The church is, after all, made up of flawed and sinful people. However, I would submit to you that those who claim to be spiritual but not religious are actually neither one. The two concepts go together. One cannot be truly growing spiritually without commitment and sacrifice.

In our own country, those who identify themselves as SBNR usually say they believe in God or at least the concept that there is a god. They see the church as rigid and pushy. According to Wikipedia, "SBNR is not just about rejecting religion outright, but not wanting to be restricted by it."

According to studies, 65% of those claiming to be SBNR, never pray or worship with others,

never read the Bible or any other scared book. They may claim that God guides their lives, but in reality they are setting themselves up as the sole judge of what is good and what is evil.

If you remember that was the temptation offered by the serpent way back in Genesis chapter 3. The serpent said, “If you eat this fruit, you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” In other words, you will be able to judge for yourself whether something is good or bad.

Does that sound familiar? Those who claim to be spiritual but not religious, often take a cafeteria approach to spirituality. “I’ll take a little bit from this faith, and a little bit from that faith over there, and just leave the rest.” “If it feels good to me, I will accept it.” SBNR says, “I and I alone decide what is good and evil.” Again that is the original sin in the Garden of Eden.

Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion, has just finished a new study on religion in everyday life. She concludes that SBNR is a unicorn - it is a species that does not exist in reality. She found that people who were most active in organized religion, were also most committed to spiritual practices and a spiritual view of the world. (Homiletics/November 2015, pg. 20)

In spite of the fact that congregations are made up of biased, broken, and sinful people, they remain the best places to practice spirituality. Ammerman concludes her study by saying that the people, “with the most robust sense of sacred presence are those who participate in religious activities that allow for conversation and relationship.” (Homiletics, pg. 21)

Now listen, if you have a friend that tells you she is spiritual but not religious, it will not be helpful for you to say, “actually you are neither.” That only feeds into the perception that the church is judgmental and condemning.

Instead you might say, “Let me tell you about what God has done for me through the church.”

Our lesson from 1 Samuel gives us some guidance in this. It is appropriate on this Women’s Thank Offering Sunday, that the hero of the faith that is held up is a woman. Hannah shows us what it means to be both spiritual and religious.

Hannah is in deep distress because she has so far been barren. In those days a woman who was unable to bear a child was often treated with contempt and considered cursed by God. In spite of this Hannah continues to go to the temple. She continues to pray. And she engages in conversation and relationship with fellow believers.

Now I want you to notice that “the church” as it is embodied by the priest Eli is judgmental and condemning. Poor Hannah is pouring out her heart to God and the priest accuses her of being drunk and making a scene. He is just plain rude.

Many of us would have fled the scene in the face of this rude and offensive behavior. Hannah does not. She stays and pours out her heart to Eli. He in turn admits that he was wrong and offers her God’s blessings and peace.

This is what we are all seeking deep down, authentic relationship. By that I mean that we are not posturing and pretending, we are confessing the truth and being honest with one another.

I have had many people tell me that they feel close to God in nature. I have no trouble with that. Certainly nature can make us more aware of the greatness of God and bring us a sense of peace. Here, though, is the thing I come back to. For the most part, a walk in nature does not challenge us to change and grow. We need God's word and other faithful Christians to do that.

To be spiritual but not religious confines our lives to feeling good. If there is one lesson that history has taught us, it is that our internal sense of goodness is flawed. I would be willing to bet that even Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussain believed that they had to do some hard things, but that ultimately their behavior was good and justified.

The center of Hannah's practice of life and spiritually is the temple. She goes there and experiences God's presence as she prays. She engages in honest conversation with a difficult fellow believer. In the end her prayer is answered. She names her son, Samuel. Samuel means, "God has heard."

God always hears, but does not always give us exactly what we ask for. But God always offers us what is best for us. God always gives us the gift of himself. And if we are willing, God wants to give us the gift of the congregation. We may still have to travel through troubled times, but we do not have to do that alone.

Saint Augustine once said that there is a god-shaped box within each of us and that only God can fill that box. Most SBNR.s would agree with that. They would also agree that what we are really looking for in life are authentic relationships. At its best the church is made up of people who are not trying to claim perfection or knowledge of all the answers. At its best the church reveals its brokenness and need for healing.

AA founder Bill Wilson discovered this profound truth. Two broken people helping each other is more effective than a whole person helping a broken one. He said, when I, in my brokenness, help another with the same problem, I become better equipped to cope. The church at its best is still full of broken people. But we are broken people who with God's help are able to help each other to heal and to grow in faith.

Bottom line, spiritually grows best in a faith community of authentic relationships. When we follow Hannah to the sanctuary, tell the truth about our needs to God and each other, and engage in authentic relationships, we receive spiritual healing. We grow in grace and peace. We receive the gifts that God has for us.

Amen.

