

## LOSE YOUR RELIGION

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I realize not everyone in the assembly today watches the Fox television series *Glee*. But I'm curious how many of you do. Would you mind to just raise your hand for a second if you've seen an episode? If you don't know, *Glee* is a show about a high school glee club which is full of exaggerated teenage talent and high school drama. Last week one of the main characters sees the face of Jesus in his grilled cheese sandwich. At first, he prays to it. "Dear Grilled Cheesus," he says, and then he asks for something he really wants.

At first it seems to be working, but he eventually realizes this is not how God operates, and he gets upset.

In typical *Glee* style, he has to sing a solo about it. His choice: The legendary REM Song, Losing my Religion.

I must have been in a curmudgeony mood when I saw it because I remember saying  
It's a good thing he lost his religion of convenience because it was idolatrous.  
After studying our lectionary readings for the morning, it's clear that more of us ought to lose our religion. And find Jesus instead.

I love it when the gospel lesson is paired perfectly with the Old Testament reading. There's almost always some connection each week. But this week, it's a true match. Two important stories involving healed lepers. In the bible, leprosy is not what we call leprosy today. It was some sort of disease of the skin which made a person unclean and caused him to

be shunned in society. The social rejection was probably the most difficult part of the disease. Naaman the Syrian (Gentile foreigner) army general has leprosy.

He visits the famed Prophet Elisha to heal him. Elisha, the successor to Elijah—the one who received Elijah's authority—does not greet Naaman in person outside his house. This is presumably because he's a leper.

So Elisha sends a messenger to greet Naaman. The messenger gives Naaman specific instructions:

Go bathe in the Jordan River 7 times.

We are told that he actually does.

But the faithful audience ought to have its collective ears perking up at the mention of the Jordan River.

This is also a symbolic reminder of the Exodus and entering the promised land through the Jordan River. Passing through the Jordan means we belong to God's people. We are no longer isolated but initiated. And Naaman still belongs to God.

There is something intrinsically healing and refreshing about returning to our identity in God. Naaman takes Elisha's advice, comes back well and stands before Elisha, saying "now I know there is no God in all the Earth except in Israel."

Likewise, in the Gospel reading there is a group of 10 lepers who meet Jesus as he's on his way to Jerusalem.

In this case Jesus is the healer and prophet. The group cries out to Jesus at a distance "Jesus, Master, Have Mercy on Us!"

Jesus doesn't send them a messenger.  
Jesus himself gives them specific instructions: Go show yourselves to the priests.  
And all 10 of them were healed in their going.  
But one comes back, and prostrates himself at Jesus' feet, giving thanks.  
Jesus not only is more powerful than Elisha, but he's also more hands-on.

A word on the relationship of these accounts:  
It is significant that Jesus in Luke 4, 13 chapters ago, actually refers to the story of Namaan.  
This is part of what gets him kicked out of the synagogue by an angry mob of religious officials.  
Can you imagine Father Peter, Mother Anne, and Bishop Grein forming into an angry mob of religious officials?  
And chasing someone out the door? It was a different time then.  
When I imagine angry mobs, someone always has a pitchfork. I wonder which one would have the pitchfork? But I digress.

There's something fundamentally scandalous about the Namaan Story.  
And It's quite significant for Luke's theology of who Jesus is and what he's up to.  
Suffice it to say, the scandal has to do with the politics of inclusion.  
Jesus is arguing that God's favor does not end with the Jews. It extends to the Gentiles as well. It extends to all people, clean or unclean.  
Big deal, you might say. But this concept is not the source of tension.  
It's easy to accept something as basically true insofar as it doesn't affect you.  
But Jesus was proclaiming a political shift in God's favor.  
The shift in favor went from the powerful to powerless. From the insiders to the outsiders.  
He was basically going to the home turf of the most powerful people in society and using their sacred platform to tell them their politics and religion were dead wrong.  
The Kingdom of God is near, he said.  
Jesus was a gutsy fellow, unconcerned to maintain the "appropriate boundaries."  
Which is why he's not afraid to engage the lepers in public.

Now, it's important to pay attention to the 1 out of the 10 who turned back to say thank you.

What is his virtue? Why does Luke take the time to add this account where it isn't in Mark or Matthew?

What is unique about him?  
Is it his gratitude or faithfulness? Not exactly. The 9 other guys had faith. They were healed. I'm sure they were grateful.  
And they did exactly what Jesus told them to do. Can't fault them.  
What's unique about the one who came back is that he was a Samaritan.  
A foreigner. Not a member of God's chosen people.  
And so, on his way to the Temple after being physically healed  
He realizes he's still an outcast because of his ethnicity.  
He may no longer be socially shunned as a leper. But remains a Samaritan.  
Like Namaan, He will not be invited inside when he arrives.  
So instead of presenting himself to the priests who don't accept him,  
He comes back and lays down at the feet of THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST.  
Instead of following a broken religion that excludes him,  
He nurtures a relationship with the God who loves him in Jesus.  
Just like Namaan, this man's experience of healing leads him to a deeper understanding of himself  
In relation to God.

I've heard lots of good sermons about this passage that emphasize  
The Samaritan's humility. Or his gratitude.  
But those sermons always leave me wanting to hear more about what I consider to be his main virtue:  
This man understands who Jesus is.  
He understands that Jesus is not just another great prophet of Israel like Elisha  
Jesus is the Lord of life. The one who deserves our devotion.  
Jesus is the one to whom we can turn when there's no one else,  
Jesus won't turn us away at the gate or send a messenger.  
He embraces us with the entirety of God's love for us.

And that's tantamount to what is, I suppose, the ultimate point here.

*God does not come to us as an idea to comprehend*

*Or a set of rules to follow*

*But as a person to love.*

The merciful, mighty, righteous, just, and loving Jesus.

Not a relic for a museum or a history book. But God for us.

When we fall at the feet of Jesus, we give ourselves not to the idea of God

We fall in love *with God* and seek to trust and obey not out of stale obligation,

But out of the desire to advance a personal relationship with God.

Over the years I've met lots of self-avowed, formerly religious people.

Especially people who were raised in traditions where there were lots of rules.

I hear the same script over and over about how Christianity is too dogmatic or rigid.

My gut reaction to that complaint is "what you're rejecting isn't really Christianity."

I reject that too.

All the 'rules' of living and the finer points of doctrine are not intended to determine who's in and out. Who's good and bad.

And they aren't useful for comparing one person's faith to another's;

They aren't even required.

They are, rather, an organized, disciplined strategy for giving Jesus our whole self in relationship,

For kneeling at his feet in gratitude and giving our lives to loving him.

Religiosity and rules make very little sense for a person who doesn't already love Jesus.

What is it about our Christian faith that makes us walk a fine line between ridicule and respect?

I suspect it's the authenticity of the Christian which makes the difference.

And that authenticity rests in whether or not we know Jesus personally.

It's about knowing Jesus.

As St Paul says in Philippians, knowing Christ Jesus as Lord is the most unsurpassable thing there is.

The reputation of our faith rests in our individual and collective commitments to God in the person Jesus.

Jesus is not an idea.

Or a religion to follow.

If you think that, I hope you lose your religion.

Trade it in on a relationship.