Sunday, August 14, 1988
WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION ANYWAY? (No. 2 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
Micah 6:6-8; Luke 6:6-11

Earlier this summer, I was on an airplane returning to Lincoln, and the man sitting next to me wanted to talk. I preferred to read, but not wanting to be rude, I gave him my attention. After some small talk, he wanted to know what company I worked for. When I told him that I worked for one of the oldest continuing organizations in the world — the Church of Jesus Christ — and that I was a pastor, he was silent for a moment. I asked him my standard question, "What kind of religious practice do you follow, or of what church are you a member?" He admitted that he was not a member of any kind of religious group and that he had some serious doubts about the usefulness or need of religion for modern 20th-century people. Underneath it all, he was asking, What Good Is Religion Anyway?

It's a question I hear frequently, and in the past year or so, I've heard it asked repeatedly in the wake of the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. It's one of those "Everyday Questions," and it's a valid one.

I tried not to be too defensive as I listened and conversed with the gentleman on the airplane. Before we could get into a detailed discussion of the issue, the plane landed, and we went our separate ways. But I've thought about his question quite a bit since then — What Good Is Religion Anyway?

First of all, we need to admit that all religion is not good. Yet, a popular assumption still held by many people is that any religion is better than none. I've heard people say, "It doesn't matter what kind of religion you have as long as you are sincere."

That's utter nonsense. Not all religion is good, and some kinds of religion can be very bad.

Not too long ago, there was a news article in the local papers about a religious leader in Warsaw, Indiana, who so dominates his followers that they willingly surrender driver's licenses, credit cards, and eyeglasses, even allow wives, husbands, and children to die rather than defy his teachings.

Dr. Hobart Freeman is the founder and leader of the Faith Assembly, which has been under public scrutiny in recent months because dozens of followers have died from untreated illnesses.

Freeman teaches his followers that medicine is evil and that doctors are little better than magicians.

Bad religion is not something new. A study of history reveals the evil that religion can do — the Crusades, the ritual sacrifice of human beings, witch hunts, the Inquisition, ugly superstitions, and more. Religion has been used to justify slavery, declare one race superior to another, and to deny women equality.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote: "What disastrous results religion can produce in human character — bigots, fanatics, hypocrites, narrow-minded, self-opinionated, intolerant! The very word 'bigot' is a condensation of 'by God.'"

What good is religion anyway? Some kinds of religion are no good at all. In fact, some kinds of religion can be hazardous to your health.

In his book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold Kushner tells about some of his experiences as a young Rabbi. One day he was called by a family to try to help them through an unexpected and almost unbearable tragedy. This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright 19-year-old woman who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. “We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapsed while walking to class this morning. It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We’re terribly sorry.”

Stunned, the parents asked a neighbor to come in to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbor notified the synagogue, and Kushner went to see them that same day. He said, “I entered their home feeling very inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn’t expect to hear the first words they said to me, ‘You know, Rabbi, we didn’t fast last Yom Kippur.'”

Why did they say that? Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for their daughter’s sudden death because they had not prayed in the right way or observed a certain religious festival in the correct manner? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down a young woman without warning as punishment for someone else’s religious infraction?

What good is religion anyway? Sometimes no good at all.

In the scripture reading from Luke’s Gospel read earlier, we find another example of where religion was trying to be a hindrance until Jesus challenged the system. Jesus had entered the synagogue and was teaching as was his custom. A man was present whose right hand was withered. According to the religion of the Scribes and the Pharisees, this man could not be healed because it was the Sabbath, and healing was considered work, and a truly religious person was not to do any work on the Sabbath, even that kind of work which would benefit another person.

Jesus knew his enemies were watching him to see whether or not he would heal the man. So he asked them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” Then Jesus took the man and healed him.

What good is religion anyway? Some religion is no good at all. The right kind of religious faith, however, can be and has been a force for the good in people’s individual lives and in the world at large.

Remember, Christians started some of the first schools, colleges, and universities. Religious groups, mostly Christian, organized the first hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and more. Followers of Jesus Christ were instrumental in the opposition to slavery in this country, and it was out of the black Christian churches especially, that the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s had its beginning and continuing power.

What good is religion anyway? Here are four good things which good religion, and especially our Christian faith, continues to offer us as individuals and the world at large.

Our Christian faith can help us maintain a sense of awe and mystery about life and about creation. With awe also comes humility, and with humility, an ability to put one's life in perspective and re-order life's priorities.
Awe is the feeling one gets when seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time or being present or giving birth to a baby.

Awe can come from contemplating the immensity of creation. I read in the newspaper last week that astronomers have now discovered a galaxy 15 billion light-years from Earth, one of the most distant galaxies ever seen.

Another story in the papers last week reported that astronomers searching for radio signals from intelligent life beyond the earth say circumstantial evidence is growing that humankind is not alone in the universe.

If you studied biology, maybe you can remember the early feelings of wonder that came with viewing, for the first time, cell life through the microscope. There is mystery at both ends of creation, the exquisitely small and the infinite.

It's the feeling of awe, wonder, and humility the Psalmist had when writing:

"O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth. When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?"

Albert Einstein wrote: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. Those to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, are as good as dead: their eyes are closed."

One reason this kind of church emphasizes regular participation in public worship each week is that at least for one time in a week, we take the time to think beyond ourselves and beyond our everyday problems and routines, and regain a sense of the holy, of mystery, and awe.

Our lives are always running ahead. Every moment is filled with something that must be done or seen or said or planned. No one can experience wonder, mystery, and depth without stopping and becoming aware of the wonder of God's creation. We need to ponder who we are and what is the meaning and purpose of our lives. Regular worship can help us do that.

The second good thing which the Christian faith gives us is a method of determining what is right and what is wrong. There seems to be built within each one of us that instinct that some things are right and some are wrong. But we frequently get right and wrong mixed up. In fact, the most destructive evil in the world is always done in the name of good. So we need guidelines, parameters, directions.
In the Old Testament of the Bible, the Ten Commandments formed the basis of the moral code, however, many of the Old Testament prophets went even further. So, for example, the Prophet Micah wrote: "God has shown you what is good and what does God require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

In the New Testament, Jesus built his ethical framework on these basic rules but also went beyond them. When someone asked Jesus one day, which of the Commandments was the greatest or the most important, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And then when a lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” he told the parable of the Good Samaritan to point out that anyone in need is your neighbor.

Not only does our Christian faith help us determine right from wrong, but it also promises God’s forgiveness when we do wrong. Jesus assured us that God’s love is continually and freely given to all who accept it. It cannot be bought or earned. Each human being in creation is equally loved by God. This is another way of saying that we each have equal value in God’s economy, The criminal on death row, the patient in the mental hospital, the beggar on the street, the rich, the poor, all are loved by God. And if God so loves us, then we are also to love each other.

Thirdly, our Christian faith gives us a sense of community. We human beings need to be able to take part in the joys and sorrows of each other, and we go to a church to find God but also to find others.
Our Christian faith proclaims that God has created us as inter-dependent creatures and we are meant to live in peace and harmony with one another and with God’s creation as a whole.

Harry Golden, the Jewish writer, once asked his father, an atheist, why he regularly went to the synagogue. “You know Garfinkel?” Golden’s father responded, “Garfinkel goes to the synagogue to talk with God; I go to talk with Garfinkel.”

Life without friendships, life without human relationships, is like the sky without the sun.

The headline in a news story in the local papers two weeks ago said: Loneliness Doubles Risk of Sickness, Death. The story reported that a recent new study showed that “being cut off from friendships and family doubles a person’s chance of sickness and death ... a lack of social relationships in and of itself heightens people’s susceptibility to illness. The data shows that people who are isolated but healthy are twice as likely to die over the period of a decade or so as are others in the same health, but who are not isolated and lonely.”

What good is religion anyway? The right kind of religion can help provide a loving and forgiving community — something we all need.

The fourth good thing which our Christian faith gives us is a place to turn to when all else fails. When we have been as brave and as dedicated as we can be and have run dry, we have a place we can turn to. God is always there.
It is our faith that God doesn’t ever give up on us. Our humanness belongs to the goodness of the creation... And God, through Christ, takes part in our sufferings, our guilt, our pain, our joy, our happiness. God’s love is never contingent on what we strive to do. God gives us what is needed to heal the disorders of the human spirit and to initiate new possibilities for every human life and for the world as a whole. What good is religion anyway? It can be the greatest good in the world if it leads us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.