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What a magnificent era this is for religion.

One of the joys of being a minister is that I have had the opportunity to study religion in a historical perspective. When I look at the history of religion, I celebrate that I am alive today because this is a wonderful time in history for religion.

So what's wrong with me? How can I say that when churches are less powerful than in the past, when attendance at church has gone down, when clergy don't get the respect or the money that they did in the past? I can say that because the church's lost in power and prestige is also religion's great gain.

Let me explain:

Religion is no longer the political world power that it has been in history. It is no longer an authority structured to control people. It is not trying to be the influence behind governments. Therefore religion is free to focus on relationship with God.

Religion no longer lives in fear of the outside world. It does not see the world as evil or filled with demons wanting to destroy it. Therefore religion can interact with the world and learn from all of its different perspectives.

Religion is no longer in competition with science. Religion and the church have matured and found humility. God's wisdom is seen as being present in all of the world so religion is willing to learn from every area about the presence of God in all things. Therefore science is not an enemy but a doorway to deeper understandings about the nature of God.

What a great time in history for religion.

What a great time to be in relationship with God.

Our relationship with God is not a relationship of fear as in the past. It is not a relationship of trying to manipulate God to get things our way and to

control outcomes. It is not a relationship that is based in lies trying to hide who we really are. Relationship with God is not a relationship that we have to approach with certain forms and words or prescribed magical devices. Relationship with God can be seen as a relationship of trust and openness to receive, to learn about God through creation and through science and through meditation as well as through traditional readings and practices.

What a wonderful time this is to really attempt to understand our relationship with the God who created us.

I am pleased at been given the opportunity to chat with you this morning because this is such a amazing time in history for religion. You and I have been given greater opportunities to understand God than people had in the past. I have spent the majority of my life trying to understand God and trying to be in relationship with God. So I thought that instead of entertaining you this morning I might share with you some tools that I have found helpful in my own trying to know God better. (So yes you are about to experience the dreaded teaching sermon.)

As Protestants we begin with the Bible. Some say that we learn all that there is to know about God from the Bible. Although I think the Bible contains great truths about God, I also think that holding the position that the Bible contains the only truth about God is to take the easy way out. It is saying that if I learn all there is to know about that one book I will have all the answers. It seems to me that God (and relationship with God) is greater than that. God is greater than what can be contained in a book, even a book written by people inspired by God. I don't think that God can be simplified like that. We learn something about God when we look at what God has created and attempt to understand how creation fits together. We learn something about God when we experience the liturgy of the church and repeat rituals and read the words that the church has found enlightening from the beginning. We learn something about God when we quiet ourselves and listen in prayerful acceptance for the God who communicates in love directly with us.

These four aspects of trying to know God should be familiar to Methodists. John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church in his search for an understanding of God came up with a series of checks and balances. The foundation of people's experience with God, he held, was the Bible. But people tend to use the words of the Bible in a variety of ways and even the

words from parts of the Bible seem to conflict with words from other parts of the Bible, so what are we to do?

Wesley suggested that to really understand God in the Bible it takes tradition and reason to help comprehend the Bible. Tradition was what the church had come to believe down through its existence. Reason was applying all our understanding about people and how they write and when they wrote and the context in which they were writing. Both reason and tradition, Wesley suggested, were helpful in really understanding the meaning of the Bible.

Wesley also came to believe that personal feelings of God's presence and the personal experience of God was important. Again he had checks and balances to prevent someone from believing that something was true which would bring about horrible consequences. One's personal experience was to be measured against other people's experiences in the Bible, and against what people had experienced as seen through the traditions and history of the church. It was also to be weighed against what seemed reasonable and consistent about God when weighed with tradition and the Bible.

All four pieces were important to Wesley because each balanced and informed the other and prevented one from going in directions that would end up false and destructive. Recently the four balancing tools of Wesley – scripture, tradition, reason, and experience - have come to be called the quadrilateral (a word that we teach in confirmation class and you may have heard from your kids).

It is a wonderful time in history for religion and we have some wonderful tools and the humility to use them but it seems to me that there is a present day imbalance in the four ways of approaching God. One of the four seems to be grossly underutilized in mainstream churches today.

Despite the advances in understanding, one of the dangers that I see today in the church is that people are afraid to experience God directly. Paul makes it clear in the scripture lesson for today that he was basing his life and his belief on his personal experience of God. He makes it clear that he did not learn about following Christ from Jesus (whom he never met) or from writings about Jesus (which we not in existence) or even from the disciples. He learned it from his personal experience of Christ. Paul molded the whole rest of his life upon that experience and was willing to defend it against any

authority in the church or in the government of Rome. He was willing to be thought of as a fool for his belief in his experience.

In my time as a psychologist, because the hospitals where I worked knew that I was also a minister, I would often be called in to consult with the psychiatrist when there was someone who had religious delusions. It was my job to help differentiate between faith statements and religiosity, between religious faith and mental illness.

I sometimes think that people today are afraid to experience God because they fear that others will think that they are crazy. So people come to church and work hard in church and worship in church and pray for others but they are afraid to let themselves fully experience the reality of God.

My suggestion, as one who spent many years working with people with mental illness, is that when it comes to God; we are not too crazy, we are rather not crazy enough.

The people of the church need to trust that they can experience God as a reality in their life and then live in that reality. The tools are there to test what we experience so we don't go off some deep end but the real power of belief is found in one's personal experience of God.

One of my favorite stories is the story that is told about a young man who went to the desert to visit an elderly monk, who had lived in the desert for many years. Arriving at the holy man's cave, the young man found the monk sitting out enjoying the sun, his dog lying lazily at his side.

This spiritual seeker asked, "Why is it, teacher, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?"

The old man smiled and replied, "Let me tell you a story:

"One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large, white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon other dogs heard him and joined him - barking across the creeks, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit,

discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit. In that story, young man, is the answer to your question.”

The young man sat in confused silence. Finally, he said, "Teacher, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for God?"

"You fail to understand," answered the old hermit, "because you failed to ask the obvious question. The question is, why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? And the answer to that question is that the other dogs had not seen the rabbit. They were attracted by the barking of my dog. But once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase. Seeing the rabbit, and not following the commotion, is what keeps me in the desert."

This is a wonderful time in history to look for the rabbit and, when you experience it, to chase it with all our heart and strength.

Two weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost and heard the story of when the gathered people experience God's presence and those who passed by thought they were drunk or crazy. Their experience gave them a foundation of faith that created the church in the face of great persecution. That same experience of God is available to you today in even greater ways.

Look to experience God's presence in the wonder of creation that is all around you.

Experience God in the gift of awe that comes through science.

Use the freedom that is yours these days to see how God has been experienced in the multitude of different religions.

Allow yourself to use the practices of Christian traditions (like meditation, and communion and prayer and scripture contemplation) to experience God's presence in deep and private ways.

Come to know God for yourself in a personal way.

Let God be a daily, intimate reality for you.

I promise that once you do, you will be caught up in a wonderful chase that will sustain your life and fill it with meaning.