

Matthew 5:13-20
I Corinthians 2: 1-16

SBNR

The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

As my youngest child is approaching his 21st birthday, I've written to my sons about the important things of faith and life. Here's how it goes.

Dear Charlie and Luke,

It's time we had a thoughtful conversation about SBNR (Spiritual but not religious). I'll be blunt. Are you done with religion? Whatever your answer — I love you and accept you. But I wonder. If you were asked (and I wasn't in earshot), would you describe yourself as Christian, or Presbyterian? Your friends playing Euchre in our dining room, most of the engaged couples I counsel, folks baptized as infants and fed at this Table — are SBNRs (Spiritual but not religious). One in four Americans, mostly the young, self-identify that way. Some of our church kids who sang in the kids' choir, loved Sunday school and mission trips, went to Camp Westminster and grew tomatoes on the Hill Street property to feed the hungry— have embraced the S but not the R. I know their parents are struggling that their commitment to faith and church didn't take root in their kids as they hoped — at least, not yet.

You've told me you believe in God. You want to find your purpose, contribute, share your life with someone wonderful, explore the beauty of nature and diverse cultures. You're definitely spiritual. You question me about beliefs handed to you by the religious tradition of your birth. You've had a few mountaintop experiences with God — spontaneous and personal. The poet Rilke implied that when you live your unanswered questions, when mystery captivates you rather than frustrates you — you are being spiritual. You've never been afraid of the big questions.

But are you religious? I know you don't go to church at college after a long Saturday of study and hitting the bars, and only when you're home if I beg you. Understandably, you are distracted from faith— but I wonder if you are growing away from the church and our Christian religion. You are being taught in school, by your friends, and by me — to question authority. You're realizing that religion includes doctrine, dogma, and ritual — words with a fairly undesirable connotation. You are learning the history of hate and hurt in this country and coming to the truth that a lot of that history is tied to religion. Although First Pres seeks to acknowledge and repent where we have done harm, and strive for a better way — we are in the minority of churches willing to do so.

Most SBNR's are spiritually curious, but institutionally suspicious. You should be suspicious, that's the work of becoming an adult who thinks for yourself. In pursuing ultimate truth and seeking

faith— rebel against that which shuts down your freedom to explore who God is. You have wisdom and a conscience — ways that God’s spirit connects to you. You’re not alone. Just as I took a journey away from the triune God during my college and seminary years to explore other ways of understanding God, I expect you will, too. But I hope that, like me, you’ll return to following Jesus, loving his values and emulating them as best you can. Maybe you’ll even overcome the obstacles and find the benefits — and there are many — to organized religion. A good church will help you end up in a – the – good place?

The R-word has baggage. Religion can reek of rules, rituals, and roles. Practicing religion doesn’t require feeling anything. People can choose a religion and blindly follow prescribed practices as an antidote to their fear. Religion can make people less spiritual, and spirituality, less fun. Religiosity can be arid, inert, dead. While being spiritual cracks open one’s imagination, religion too often shuts it down.

If you are SBNR’s, boys, as your mom, and as a minister — I don’t feel discouraged, I feel challenged. Our church and every religious institution should too, should rise to that challenge by asking ourselves how we’ve become unattached, or gotten a reputation for being a place where feeling, experience, exploration is diminished, assumed to be a dying institution where our failings over the course of history overwhelm our desire to change. Can’t we learn from one another?

Authentic spirituality is more than a formless glob of self-serving sludge — it will foster deep community. The full expression and power of the Spirit comes in relationships. Personal but not partner-less, individual, but not alone — we are made in and through our interactions with others — people engaged with their beloved texts, enriching practices, and meaningful traditions. Being spiritual compels us to come together and grow. Ironically, more SBNRs get this. Atheists in Seattle have formed a church where they can ask big questions and craft meaningful rituals. Granted, they are not seeking God — but they are doing church, they are embracing some kind of R.

I can’t choose for you, but I can make my case. Christ and the church are my center — with all the baggage I bring, I feel deeply accepted and supported, especially here. This is a thoughtful church family. Our church is not a prison that holds you captive to uninhabitable beliefs, but rather a playground — a prayer ground — to wander through. Wander through the wonders of who God is, to marvel at centuries of curious people asking theological questions and shaping our essential tenets, imperfect as we know they are. First Pres is grounded but changing. It’s true. Our 1400 members don’t agree on lots of things, something we see as a strength. First Pres offers a conversation, not a lecture — the Spirit helping us enter dialogues of mutual respect. Because Jesus was political, we talk about important issues in our culture without being particularly partisan. We’re the church of jazz vespers, conversations about being queer, supporting police reform as well as black lives matter, inclusive language and rotating art installations, bread makers in this very room stimulate our senses just as preaching prepares our hearts for the sacrament — and we study the Bible. We will sing *How Great Thou Art* — from time to time — but also *Here in this Place*. The beauty of David Magumba singing a Langston Hughes poem or a potter working on the wheel to illustrate Paul’s words as they are being preached from the pulpit — week after week, we try to be spiritual AND religious. Here you are welcomed, and wanted, whoever you are. But we are also rooted in history and tradition. We hold ancient texts, complicated beliefs, and worship rituals as life-giving — not replacing new experiences as the vital center of spiritual life, but a means for engendering them. There is appeal to an ordered way of seeking faith, for structure can help shape a genuine, grounded spirituality. Walking towards this table today is a deeply spiritual experience for many religious people. Trust me on this. Someday you will experience your childhood religious tradition as adults, maybe as parents yourselves. And you will feel like you’ve come home.

No matter your gender, your skin color, your sexual orientation, the baggage you carry, the hurts you harbor, the history that is who you are — God is love and so religion, the Christian kind, must be too. Consider carefully any church that doesn't welcome fully people no matter who they love — including those fluid in their gender understanding. Be very suspicious if it is missing women in positions of leadership. Spirituality thrives by an open and inclusive mind, and plenty of Christian communities will offer that.

But we warned — every community has some that RBNS -ers...— Religious but not Spiritual, those who would shut down imagination, promote pre-determined truth, and let procedures, pronouncements, and polity close off authentic questions and creative ideas. It's joked that God and the devil were walking down a path one day when God spotted something sparkling by the side of the path. He picked it up and held it in the palm of his hand. "Ah, Truth," he said. "Here, give it to me," the devil said. "I'll organize it" — the devil in the details. Some church folks can't take the journey from the head into the heart. Even in Paul's day, the early Christians allowed their vaulted and rigid human wisdom to step in the place of God's wisdom. Forgive them, and forgive us. We all need each other.

One last thing about being spiritual — religious or not — it's also evangelical. Hear me out. I think about what Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount, thoughts echoed in other religions. He called us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We aren't buried in the earth, or put under a tarp. When we are in tune with the spirit within, and engaged in a relationship with the Spirit — we help other people to do the same. You can't be closed off and spiritual. An agoraphobic spirituality is scared to be seen, afraid to be judged. It's okay to be spiritually shy, but to bury it — reveals its weakness. When our spirituality is energized and engaged, it draws us into close communities that invite others in.

One last thing about being religious — know that these struggles are nothing new. Paul wrote to the young Corinthians because they, too, were divided. Lots of factions, trending towards hierarchy. Paul refused to fix their problems. The power, he said, was from God. And however they built their community, the focus had to be on that shared source of life that undergirded all their faith. Paul wasn't as interested in the details of what divided them as much as the Spirit that could bring them together. Our pastor Dave often says, "if our hearts are united then our heads don't have to be." Seek out the Spirit of God is at work in all of us - the SBNR's, the RBNS's, and those like us trying hard to hold both religion and spirituality together.

Boys, I have chosen Christianity — or it has chosen me. It's my religion. And I hope you will let it choose you, too. God knew we needed direction way back when — and so God came in Jesus. His life teaches us. When Jesus finished his journey on earth, he didn't disappear into retirement. God is here through the Holy Spirit, speaking to our human, hungry spirits, and helping us wrestle with all the complexities of our Christian religion. You will come to know the surpassing love of God for you in many ways in life — but I believe you will know it best through the journey of Jesus, and the greatest story ever told, a story still being written with your help.

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The apostle Paul tells us to interpret spiritual things to spiritual people. And that's what my letter is really about. Knowing you are at least an S, and hoping in your life you will someday embrace the best kind of R, this is my interpretation.

With love,

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