

SACRED & SECULAR

"Both/And" Sermon Series, week 2
A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Psalm 139:7-10, 1 Corinthians 10:31-33
Acts 10:1-17

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We live in a world that tends to categorize and separate things and people. It seems to be human nature to do so. We often think and say things as though life and people fit neatly into either/or categories – categories such as "heart or head," "sacred or secular," "us or them," "saint or sinner." These are specifically the four categories I am covering in this four-week sermon series, but as I do, I also acknowledge that there are plenty of other "either/or" categories floating around in our world and society these days that impact the way we see, experience and live our lives. Throughout this sermon series, we will see that faith in Jesus Christ calls us away from an "either/or" experience of one another and this world and into the wonderful truth that is "both/and."

Last Sunday, our scripture lesson and the example of John Wesley helped us see that an impactful life of faith requires both heart and head. The two complement each other and even if we tend to lean one way or the other, a balance of heart and head is absolutely necessary to faith. Without heart engagement, faith lacks emotional, relational depth and we cannot fully appreciate God's loving acts of salvation in Jesus Christ. Without head engagement, the seeking of scriptural knowledge and understanding the specifics of what following Jesus is and is not, faith lacks the foundational depth of knowing and living what is the truth. An impactful life of faith is the result of both heart and head involvement.

Today, we acknowledge our tendency to divide the world into the categories of "sacred" and "secular." We make decisions about where we expect and accept God showing up, like in church on Sunday morning, and where we do not expect God to show up, like at work or school, at the ballfield or store, at home or on vacation. What do you think, does the Bible distinguish between secular and sacred? In a sense, yes. The Bible does speak of those who are "set apart" or "sanctified" for special use. The word for "church" in the New Testament is "ekklesia" which means "a called-out assembly." This means that the people who comprise the church set apart for God and called out by God. We are called to be saints (Rm 1:7); we are called to be salt and light (MT 5:13-16). But in another sense, no, the Bible does not distinguish between secular and sacred.

The theme that ALL of creation is God's is firmly established in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and carried throughout the entire Bible. Scripture makes it clear that there is no place we can go where God is not: *"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast"* (Psalm 139:7-10). And not only is God everywhere, but *"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do*

everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). In other words, everything we do, from work, to relationships, to hobbies, to eating and drinking, is to be done for the glory of God.

In our daily lives as people of faith that which is sacred and that which is secular cannot be neatly separated from each other. I think our attempts to divide sacred from secular, to divide our life between the things we do for God and the things we do everywhere else, is actually a pervasive problem in our society. Scripturally, there is no drawing of a sharp distinction between the spiritual parts of our lives like praying, Bible reading, church attendance, service to others, and the rest of our lives which includes work, chores, money, hobbies, rest and fun.

When we try to compartmentalize our lives into secular and sacred categories, we risk relegating "church stuff," "faith stuff" to Sundays and thinking that the rest of the week belongs to us, to live as we please. When we do that, there is a disconnect between our faith and our everyday life. We end up pulling out our faith on Sunday and then putting it away the other days of the week unless we decide to bring it out for just a short devotional time each day. But Scripture simply does not allow for a sacred or secular divide like this. God cares about every aspect of our lives, not just the parts we do within the context of a church or ministry setting. We are to love and serve the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength every day and not just with what's left over after we attend to all the "secular" activities that monopolize most of our lives. Scripture tells us that everything we tend to categorize as "secular" is actually infused with the "sacred."

Consider some of the ways we divide the world up into sacred and secular. We do it when we think that religion and science, church and state, profane and holy have nothing to do with the other. We like to draw lines, but our call, our task as people of faith is to listen to what God is saying to us in all areas of life, and maybe especially in those places that are outside those sacred lines we have drawn. There are times when that which is sacred and secular are and should be separate, but there are also examples of them coming together and speaking truth to one another, so that God's love and grace can more visibly be seen and experienced in both.

For example, there are sacred songs and there are secular songs. Sacred music is what you hear and sing during worship; it has an overtly religious, Christian theme. Secular music is basically everything else. I invite you to think of one of your favorite "secular" songs – a song that when you hear it on the car radio or because you've told "Alexa" to play it you can't help but smile. Before you know it, you're singing, maybe you're tapping your foot, clapping your hands, or even dancing a bit. That song fills you with joy. And even though the song is written by a secular artist and there is not an overtly Christian theme, it conveys something deeply meaningful to you.

In the tenth chapter of Acts, we see God moving beyond the human distinctions of sacred and secular, holy and profane. God brings salvation and creates a faith community beyond the human drawn lines that made it clear who inside the community of faith and who was outside. The story begins in

Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in that area, and specifically at the home of Cornelius, a Roman soldier known to be a good man. He was known to be devout, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful. And yet, his Gentile background and his everyday eating and living habits placed him in a separate category from those considered to be children of God. An angel appears in a dream to Cornelius and says, "*your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God*" (Acts 10:4b). In other words, his life has honored God. God is pleased and wants Cornelius to hear and know more about faith, so the angel tells him to send men to retrieve Simon Peter from Joppa, a seaport town about 40 miles south of his home in Caesarea.

The next day, as those men approached Joppa, Peter was praying up on the roof of the house where he was staying. While there he started feeling hungry. He asked for something to eat, but while the food was still being prepared, he had a vision. Apparently, God was in both Caesarea and Joppa, arranging visions that would bring Cornelius and Peter together. Peter's vision is much stranger than the one Cornelius had the day before. Peter sees heaven open and something like a large sheet being lowered to the ground by its four corners. Peter looks inside. Now it's certainly not unusual for people to imagine their favorite foods when hungry but that's not what is happening. Peter sees camels, badgers, buzzards, pigs and all kind of other creatures that were on the "do not eat" list from Leviticus 11. It was enough to make a Jewish man lose his appetite. These were creatures that a good Jew dared not even touch, much less eat. The Jewish dietary laws were strict, and Peter had faithfully kept them all his life. Those laws had helped maintain the Jewish identity throughout centuries of foreign occupation. It was probably not unlike how a sheet full of rats and lizards, snakes and bats might be extremely repulsive to most of us.

And then, as if looking upon such creatures was not bad enough, God says, "*Get up Peter; kill and eat*" (Acts 10:13). Peter couldn't believe God was telling him to break the sacred dietary laws that he had been taught by his parents and grandparents. Perhaps his immediate thought was that God must be joking or testing him, but God is insistent. Peter says, "*By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean*" (Acts 10:14). But that is not the answer God wants to hear, so God says, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane*" (Acts 10:15). And to make sure that Peter didn't miss the point, God said it not once but three times before lifting the sheet back into heaven.

So, when Cornelius' men arrive shortly after that vision and tell Peter they were there because of a vision Cornelius had the day before, Peter puts two and two together and goes with them to Caesarea. As Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he was met not only by Cornelius but by a house full of Gentile relatives and close friends. Perhaps Peter was taken aback, because he said, "*You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile...*" (Acts 10:28). In my opinion, that was not a nice thing to say, but it was what he had been taught. It must have sounded like the same "putdown" those Gentiles had heard so many times before from Jewish neighbors who would not step foot into their homes for fear of being contaminated.

"BUT..." Peter says next. You know that word can make all the difference. Sometimes I think the whole gospel swings on that word. "I was lost BUT now I'm found, was blind BUT now I see." That word means things can change. It means we do not always know everything there is to know. It means God can still teach us something new. It means God might just be where we don't expect God to be, and God might just challenge us to step beyond what we are used to doing and comfortable doing. "BUT," said Peter, *"God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean"* (Acts 28b).

Peter shares what he just learned about God not showing partiality (Acts 10:34), and for the Gentiles in that room, it was the first time they had ever heard such a thing come from the mouth of a Jew. What Peter says is something no one on earth had authorized him to say, and he doesn't even back himself up by quoting scripture. Peter is fully relying on the new revelation that God had just given him, and a blossoming belief that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. While Peter was speaking to Cornelius and everyone else gathered in his home, the Holy Spirit moves and falls not only upon Peter and the Jews who had accompanied him, but also upon all the Gentiles. Peter ends up baptizing all those Gentiles, and apparently that's exactly what God wanted to happen. Peter came to understand that God not only can but does show up in unexpected and unlikely places. God can be with him during a sacred time of prayer on a rooftop in Joppa, but at the same time God can also be present in the home of a Gentile in Caesarea. The story of Peter and Cornelius reveals that God can be present anywhere and everywhere, and it also reveals that God is at work in people's lives wherever they are.

God sends Peter to Cornelius, and it is there, not in the comfort of Peter's community and sacred space, but in a Gentile home in Caesarea that the Holy Spirit falls upon all who were present. What might it look like for you specifically and for us as a faith community to trust that God is working in people and places outside of this church, and even among those whom we might not normally associate? Are there things or people that you consider "unclean," "profane," or "off limits"? When or where do you say, "God, you can't possibly be asking me to go there or to do that? Let's try to be honest for a few moments, because in all honesty, we do make judgments, and we place limits on God. We say that we know where God is and where God is not; we say who God loves and who God does not love; we say where God's Spirit may or may not blow. And yet, we are called to go where God wants us to go, to say and do what God wants us to say and do, and to love like Jesus showed us how to love.

The Christian faith is a "both/and" faith, and today's "both/and" challenge makes it clear that we are to look for and listen to God, even if doing so brushes up against our own understanding of what is sacred and what is secular. As people of faith, our goal is to do what God is doing, wherever God is doing it. Amen.