

## Superstition and Religion

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Holy Communion  
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Deuteronomy 18:9-22; Mark 1:21-28

“How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” -- Deuteronomy 19:21

If you were here in worship last Sunday, you may be wondering why we repeated two of the three lessons we read then, and why there are only two lessons from Scripture this morning instead of our usual three.

The answer is that I was asked after the service if I'd be willing to preach on the two lessons from last week I didn't preach on then, since I'd preached on only the epistle from 1 Corinthians, and nothing pleases a preacher more than to be asked to speak on something that's been read out in church. It shows that people are listening, paying attention, wondering what things might mean, turning things over in their minds, weighing possibilities.

Those are just the sorts of pew reactions most preachers would give their eye-teeth for, so this morning's sermon is at your request. And if any of you would like to hear a sermon on a text or a topic of special concern to you and that you think our church as a whole would benefit from, please let me know.

So as I set about to prepare this morning's sermon, I took a second look at the reading from Deuteronomy from last week, and I realized immediately that the reading identified by the lectionary was only part of the story being told by Moses in that passage. If you look at the verses we read last week in their larger context, you see right away that Moses's words about true and false prophets are part of a larger concern, namely, trying to help the ancient Israelites recognize the difference between superstition and religion, and that, I realized, would need to be the topic of this morning's sermon.

Superstition and religion. Some people would say they're the same thing. Most of those folks, however, aren't here this morning. They don't come to church except for christenings, weddings, funerals, and the like. They can't be bothered with religion because, to them, so much of what passes for religion seems little more than an attempt on the part of church and society – or mosque and society or temple and society or synagogue and society, depending on your context – to use superstition to control people's behavior.

Threaten people with an angry God, the sort of God the first reading suggests might be waiting to smite down a false prophet or any of the rest of us caught misbehaving. Threaten people with a fiery hell. Dupe the gullible with tales of miraculous cures, like this morning's gospel reading. And bilk the foolishly tender-hearted from their last Social Security check to enrich yourself and your television ministry cronies.

That's the stereotype of bogus religion, and it has traction because it too often is true. I have a friend who was a charlatan faith healer as a child and is now an outspoken atheist. Professor Hector Avalos, of Iowa State University, has renounced the fundamentalist Pentecostalism of his childhood and now considers his alleged "healings" as a child to be a total sham. In some cases, they were outright frauds, using audience plants, and in other cases they were psychosomatic suggestions in which people "healed" themselves. In no case does Professor Avalos now believe that he, as a child, was God's agent for miraculous healing, and he has made it his life's mission to draw people away from idle and wasteful religious speculation and back to this world of physical reality in order to make it a better, more just, more peaceful, more loving place.

You and I know this to be true. We know that religion has always had more than its share of flimflamery, con artists, snake-oil peddlers, and downright scoundrels. We also know that there have been plenty of pathetic people willing to believe anything and everything in a desperate desire to escape the miseries of this life and their awareness of their own mortality.

But we also know that our faith recognizes these hard facts about religion and warns us, as 1 John 4 says, to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God," and Paul told the Thessalonians in his first letter to "test everything." That reading from Deuteronomy told the ancient Israelites to do the same thing. Don't believe every Tom, Dick, and Mary who claims to have special powers to predict the future, see into the unknown, control the forces of nature, or reveal the mind of God. Don't be hoodwinked; don't be gullible. Use your mind, use your powers of discernment, use your common sense. Remember always that there's a vast difference between being a fool for Christ and being just a fool.

Those of us in the religion business know perfectly well that there is no proof for our claims. I cannot prove the existence of God; no one can. I cannot prove that a man named Jesus lived – although the historical evidence is in his favor – or that he did the things recorded in the gospels about him or taught the things attributed to him. Again, the historical evidence favors his life and work, however, because it's historically unlikely that a Matthew, Mark, Luke, John or their communities together could have come up with the teachings of a religious genius and social and political revolutionary. Neither anonymous persons nor groups of people behave that way. So the evidence of there having been a Jesus who did and said at least most of what he is reported to have said and done is in Jesus's favor.

But what of the supernatural elements of the story? What are we to make of the miracles, including the miracle of his resurrection? If we believe them, have we succumbed to superstition? And if we reject them, saying they couldn't possibly have happened, do we walk out of our churches, turn out the lights, and try to make the world a better place as ethical humanists, as my friend Professor Avalos has and does?

I believe that's a false choice, just as I believe putting religion and superstition together is a false union. There is a difference between religion and superstition. The difference lies not "out there," in the natural world, but in here, inside of us, where our motives and desires direct what we want and how we behave. That's the proper realm of both superstition and religion. They both reside in us, but they're very different.

Superstition is about control; religion is about surrender.

Superstition is about calling attention to oneself or being attached to someone who does; religion is about humbling oneself before the majesty and mystery of God and God's physical presence in the universe.

Superstition is trying to get God or the forces of nature to do what you want; religion is about trying to bring one's own unruly nature into conformity with ultimate

reality.

Superstition is about sacrificing the intellect for the sake of allegiance to a human leader; religion is about loving God with one's whole mind, heart, and strength.

Superstition is about retreating, with a clique of devotees, into esoteric self-gratification; religion is about opening oneself, one's community, and the wisdom of one's tradition to the world's beauty, suffering, pain, and promise.

Superstition is about living in fear of malevolent powers; religion is about embodying the perfect love that casts out fear.

Superstition is about witches and spells and black cats and salt over the shoulder; religion is about Jesus the Christ, who calls us not to throw salt over our shoulder but to be salt -- and light and leaven for the world.

There is an enormous difference, my friends, between superstition and religion, and neither our Scripture nor our tradition calls us to superstition. The Christian faith is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be embarrassed by, nothing to hide; it's not superstition.

The Christian faith, our religion, provides nurture, help, guidance, and support as we all have to make our way through this life and into whatever life is to come. The Christian faith calls us to lives of love, justice, peace, service, and self-sacrifice on behalf of the world God made and loves. The Christian faith isn't for those too dim, too weak, or too afraid to face reality; it's for those with the courage to love in the face of almost overwhelming pressure to hate or neglect. There's nothing superstitious at all about a religion like that. And it's ours, to do with as we will.

There's an old saying that if a fool looks into the Bible, an apostle will not look out. Religion and superstition work in a similar way. Superstition isn't created by religion; superstition is created by superstitious people. Religion is created by human beings touched by the awareness that we are part of something greater, more wonderful, and more mysterious than we can account for simply by observing nature, and religion is the expression of our desire to be united with that greatness, beauty, and mystery, now and always.

We can't prove the mystery; we can only point to it with our lives. With religion, we point to the stars; with superstition, we point to their reflection in standing water. And so the question for all of us this morning, as it is every morning, is this: In which direction do our lives point?