

The Real Deal

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Philippians 2:1 NLT

I love chance encounters with strangers who love to talk. While on vacation, I happened to find myself poolside sitting next to a chatty stranger. Unencumbered with knowledge of my name, age or shoe size, this person had no information with which to gauge or filter potentially sensitive conversation topics (not that this fellow seemed to be the filtering type). His favorite topic: religion. More to the point, he was curious as to why anyone practiced “organized” religion. I missed several of his key points, thinking about our NorthStar Community. I chuckled to myself and wondered if he saw our lack of “organization” – would he think we were religious?

I think he went on and on for awhile about the “rituals” of religion. He seemed to appreciate religious rituals; although, I must admit, I can’t remember the values he so passionately listed. Again, I was distracted - wondering what our NSC “rituals” include, and questioning whether the few that we had were of value or not. (Pete tapping the microphone every week to see if it’s on – that’s a ritual. Our faithful set up team unpacking the trailer with unwavering faithfulness – that’s a ritual. Our river baptisms – another ritual!)

He had my full attention when he began to discuss his perception on the value of religion as it pertains to the character of the believer. We’ve all heard this argument before – believers are such hypocrites! They lie, cheat, steal, fornicate, abuse, neglect and harm others with about the same zeal as those who don’t participate in “organized” religion. He made me think about step eight. A lot of what he said was true; if he were wrong, we wouldn’t be in need of a step eight! I wonder if that’s what Paul was thinking about when he penned...*is there any encouragement from the belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit?*

Frankly, I couldn’t totally agree with this guy. I realize that I lead a very privileged life – I know many people who have found their freedom in Christ – and not wasted it! They’ve allowed God to have His way with them. They’re living transformed lives. I’m not sure that they feel particularly organized religiously, but I would say that they seem to feel a profound spiritual connection to God. Some seem to appreciate faith experiences that are rich in rituals, others don’t report that as a particularly high value.

But there’s one thing that’s true of all the people I’ve ever known who have found freedom and embraced it: they are the real deal. They live as citizens of heaven.

In chapter two of Philippians, Paul had this to say about what it means to live as a citizen of heaven:

...love one another, work together with one mind and purpose. Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. Do everything without arguing or complaining, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people...

I never got around to talking to this guy about the fact that whether one’s faith experience is organized and ritualistic or not may be missing the mark. What I did learn from him is this: he may miss his opportunity to be a citizen of heaven because so many of us do not refuse to our freedom go to waste. Let me reframe that. Every single time we presume upon God’s grace by accepting God’s gift of freedom without shouldering the mantle of responsibility that comes with heavenly citizenship – we’re harming others.