

8 April 2011

KCC Question of the Week

Here's *The Question of the Week*:

I like Jesus but am not too comfy with the whole "organized religion" thing. What to do?

Here's an attempt at a response:

It's always hard to know exactly what people mean by "organized religion". Usually it seems to mean the way a well-known religion is practiced by groups who often have buildings and budgets, rules and responsibilities, successes and struggles.

As a Christian it is important for me to say right off the bat that Jesus was not "too comfy" with organized religion.

In Luke's Gospel, for instance, early in his ministry Jesus went to his hometown church (the synagogue), preached before the congregation, and was promptly almost thrown off a cliff. That sets a trend. Jesus is always wrestling verbally with the leadership of God's people, of "organized religion" – the scribes and Pharisees. And these battles, coupled with Jesus' actions, lead ultimately to his death.

But the strange thing is that right after he's almost tossed off the cliff, Luke says Jesus insists on continuing to preach in such places. He insists on returning to the halls of "organized religion" with reform in mind. Also, Jesus starts calling disciples to follow him by forming a community. In other words, Jesus starts organizing them.

Plainly put, Jesus lives in a tension – he isn't too comfy with the organized religion into which he's born, but he acts in such a way which realizes that God works through it, especially through its renewal.

God works through social bodies of people, their relationships, their actions, their stories, and their resources. A life of faith, at least Christian faith, is not just about God relating to an individual off alone by himself saying and doing whatever he or she pleases.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, following Jesus is about being a living part a body of people all connected to one another through Christ. Faith is a personal but not a solitary, isolated affair. To use a cliché, there are no Lone Ranger Christians. Even if I'm alone with my Bible, a whole community of people down through the ages has sweated, bled, and died to put the book in my hands.

I'm a pastor and so a daily part of "organized religion", but I'm not altogether comfy with it either. I'm sickened by how often its focus has been lost and its power misused. Hopefully, this discomfort, and the discomfort of others, is a force that God uses to help refine the message and life of his people so we can better fulfill our calling to represent Jesus well here and now.

Try replacing the word "religion" in "organized religion" with all sorts of other things and see what you get. In each case, I notice a tension that can't be removed.

Try "organized family" for instance. Who isn't sometimes driven near to insanity by their family, but how else do we come into the world and learn the hard work of love?

What about "organized sports" for another? Goodness, a football team can be a mess – a sour stew of competing egos, a collection of silly rules, a series of damaging collisions. But how else is football to be played?

And what of "organized military"? "Army of One" might have been a good slogan, but I've never heard a soldier talk as if the military could exist in any other way than as a "band of brothers" (and sisters, of course). Without organization it cannot be.

We are made for relationship with others, for working with others, for leaning upon others. We cannot exist without such "organization".

But we also live in a broken world where such relationships can easily be abused. There is a deep power, a deep magic perhaps, that can be used for good or for ill.

There is a question that is the natural response to the question asked above: Why is someone uncomfortable with "organized religion"?

Has the person been damaged by it? Then I pray the person will seek healing and become a Christ-like agent of reform for the sake of all involved.

Does the person think it's ridiculous that something as flawed as the church might have something to teach? Then perhaps arrogance is coming into play.

Does the person think that the church is horribly out of touch? Then introduce it to the people you care about – the poor, the old, the young, whomever. That is exactly how the focus of the church can be regained.

From time to time, I have been able to answer yes to all the questions above. But there is good news. There is no individual or organization under heaven that doesn't have room to grow more healthy under the power of Christ's self-giving love.

Thanks for the question.

Peace in Christ,

Robert