

September 13, 2020
Nitty Gritty Meet Religion

John Currier in 1949 was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Later he was transferred and paroled to work on a farm near Nashville, Tennessee.

In 1968, Currier's sentence was terminated, and a letter bearing the good news was sent to him. But John never saw the letter, nor was he told anything about it. Life on that farm was hard and without promise for the future. Yet John kept doing what he was told even after the farmer for whom he worked had died.

Ten years went by. Then a state parole officer learned about Currier's plight, found him, and told him that his sentence had been terminated. He was a free man.

Would it matter to you if someone sent you an important message-the most important in your life-and year after year the urgent message was never delivered?

Well folks, the message is seemingly going undelivered. The Bible is the top selling book in the world year after year after year. In fact it has been on the top of the bestseller list for a dozen and a half decades. A USA Today poll showed that 23%, almost one in four, professing Christians, have never read the bible. 51% said that they read the bible monthly; yet, half couldn't name the four gospels. A group of students reported that the New Testament Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luther and John; that Eve was created from an apple and that Jesus was baptized by Moses.

A New England teacher quizzed a group of college bound high school juniors and seniors on the Bible. The answers were astounding. Among the more unusual answers was that Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers and Jezebel was Ahab's donkey. The answer that took the prize was given by a fellow who was academically in the top 5 percent of His class. The question, "What Is Golgotha?" The answer, "Golgotha was the name of the giant that slew the apostle David. Just as sure as John Currier's message that his sentence was commuted the message of scripture is going undelivered and when the message is undelivered, no one sees what is coming.

It was their downfall; they didn't see it coming at any time. The company became rather preoccupied with their organizational chart; who had what title, what was the reporting procedure, charting, standard operating procedures, all good stuff. The problem was- their product was hopelessly obsolete and overpriced. So no matter how much they tweaked and rearranged, bankruptcy trustees finally took over. Or the young fellow who bought his first car. Washed and waxed it regularly. Vacuumed it. Made the tires gleam with Armor-All. But he never noticed the odd noise under the hood, till it ran out of oil and the engine seized up. The repair bill was \$1400 dollars. Or, the individual who kept painting that funny looking brown spot on the kitchen ceiling. But after the next rainfall...

All of these worried about the externals, they looked no further than skin deep.

Trouble was for all these people, the outside stuff was just wrapping. What really mattered, and what they never managed to pay attention to, was a little bit deeper.

That is religion. Religion and religious people look at externals, the package, and the color scheme of the room. Truly spiritual are attuned to the things that only are sensed spiritually and rarely can be known empirically. So it was with the crowd and the blind man from our scripture passage today.

The crowd was like any other crowd. It was boisterous, the words emanating from the throng were probably indistinct, just a rabble really. Those in the crowd probably had no concern about what was happening around them that is until one person has the audacity to halt their parade and one person has the audacity to call out to the very person you are seeking to be close to yourself. Every person in the crowd could have called out to Jesus, if they had the audacity. But, they didn't so instead they heaped words of rebuke upon the man who had the courage to call out to Jesus in the midst of his personal nitty gritty. He is a blind guy. He calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." The first words he hears are often the first words we hear when our Nitty Gritty meets religion. "Shut Up!" Or, "Keep quiet!"

We have all been yelled at or yelled down, that is why we react that way. Religion even has the gall to say things like, “It is a sin to question God.” Or, “It’s not right to ask questions like that.” Wrong!!! The blind man proves it. It is not wrong to call out, to question, it might be socially and religiously unacceptable to do so but it is never wrong in the eyes of Jesus. The blind man when rebuked calls out all the more!

It is the nature of human beings and the nature of modern life, to silence those who interrupt our routine activities and understandings. We don’t like those who speak up, who leave the status quo, who refuse to keep quiet, who reject compliance as a way of life. We would rather have people shut up than say disturbing things from a genuine faith.

What are the most common things that happen when my Nitty Gritty meets religion? **First, religion will attempt to silence your cry.** Mike Yaconelli says it like this, “Threaten others with a loud and boisterous faith, and you will be politely (at first) asked to quiet down; dance your faith instead of sitting still in a pew, and you will be asked to leave; talk about your faith with passion and you will get expressions of concern about the inappropriateness of your emotions. Allow others to see your brokenness and you will be reprimanded for being too open; hear the music of faith and you will be warned of the danger of emotional instability.

Shel Silverstein was a poet, who wrote such works as, “Where the Sidewalk Ends”, and “A Giraffe and a Half. Perhaps you have read “The Giving Tree”? Shel also wrote a poem entitled, “The One Who Stayed.” It is an interesting poem that twists the old stalwart, “Pied Piper of Hamelin.” You know that story. The Pied Piper is hired to rid the town of rats and when he does the mayor and towns leadership refuse to pay him, after all, the rats are gone and dead, what can they lose if they don’t pay. Well, you know the rest of the story, the Pied Piper leads all the towns children away with his haunting melodies. Shel Silverstein’s poem is about one child who did not go and stayed behind: I cannot say I did not hear/ That sound so haunting hollow-/ I heard, I heard, I heard it clear.../ I was afraid to follow.

Folks, when our Nitty Gritty meets Jesus we hear the haunting sound of His voice, we sense life and hope and adventure in the gospel. We might even shout out in the midst of a crowd to “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And when you do, expect that someone, somewhere will tell you to “Be Quiet” or “Calm it down a bit.” But, don’t you dare. Jesus wants to hear from you and the truly spiritual rejoice in your requests and in your questions.

Secondly, When your Nitty Gritty meets religion your comforts are assaulted and the unfortunate result is that you become assaulted by those who are comfortable. People, we like comfort. That is why we have padded pews, air

conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter. Mess with anything preacher except the things that make me comfortable. According to the comfortable, God does today what God has always done. You'll hear this scripture quoted often, "God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The interpretation of that is that God stays the same as we have always seen Him and God acts the same as we have always seen him act. Is that really true? (PAUSE) Of course not! I want to burst a couple of bubbles today, Our God is not a nice and neat God. Fast forward through the stories of scripture and you get a different picture than those who are comfortable paint. The God of scripture is a Master of Surprises; earthquakes, donkey's that talk, visions, pillars of salt, fire from the heavens, seas split apart, a little boy killing a giant, a baby born in Bethlehem, the King of Kings going to a cross, the call of the persecutor of the church to build the church. No one can follow God for very long and be comfortable.

Many people want a church that comforts their challenges instead of challenging your comforts. That is what Jesus did and it got Him crucified and that is just plain uncomfortable. Seek the spiritual life, admit that you have Nitty Gritty stuff in your past or your present and discomfort is just around the corner and it will almost always, near 100% come from the comfortable.

Third, it is said that children can be vicious. Well they can, but most of the time they are vicious because they are honest. Nothing like a kid to just flat out tell you that you are ugly or boring or that you have a crooked nose or a dozen other physical problems. Kids can be down right mean but they don't mean anything by it, they haven't learned to creatively disguise and color the truth. The church on the other hand can be mean. They were mean in Jesus' day. It didn't take long for the religious folks of the day to start pointing fingers and calling names; names like win-bibber, that's a drunk in our vocabulary. That was closely followed by Sabbath breaker and blasphemer. And religion has refined refined name-calling to an art. The name most commonly used today is unspiritual. Do it different, say it different, look a little different well you're unspiritual. If I cry, pray at the altar, sing really loud, hold my hands up, request re-baptism, what would people say? When my Nitty and my Gritty meets religion, name calling often abounds. You'll be called something else besides spiritual. She's a charismatic, they're Pentecostals, you know those about those Baptists or Catholics on an on and on. And those are just the acceptable ones. Anything that doesn't look like me, dress like me, act like me, believe exactly like me can't be like me so they must be something else and since I am spiritual, they can't be. In other word's, "You are doing God all wrong."

According to the critics of His day, Jesus did God all wrong. He went to the wrong places, said the wrong things and perhaps worst of all he said that the kingdom of God was for anyone. When Nitty Gritty met Jesus, he threw the doors of his love and mercy open wide to the whosoever and the “not-a-chancers” like you and me. When religion meets our Nitty Gritty meet we meet all sorts of self-appointed kingdom monitors, condemning and guarding the kingdom of God to keep the riffraff out. It is rather sad to realize that we stumble into this glorious party we were not invited to and find the uninvited standing at the door making sure other uninviteds don't get in.

There is the blind man again. He is uninvited into this crowd but the crowd slides close enough to him that he gets swept up into the excitement of the one whom the crowd is gathering around. I am sure that the original crowd got swept into the presence of Jesus much the same way and here they are the uninvited trying to keep another uninvited away. But, the blind man will have none of this, he shouts all the more. I have heard some sermons on this topic and I have never heard what I considered a good reason for the blind man, yelling out all the more. One pastor said that the reason he did was because it was necessary to get Jesus' attention and the implication is that we must pray harder and more diligently for our needs. In reality, he had to yell louder because he had to raise his voice above the people telling him to shut up. It is interesting to note here that these kingdom monitors and

humanity condemners could not have been paying much attention to Jesus and what he had to say, they were too wrapped up in silencing the hurting and ignoring the needy. That is exactly what happens when our Nitty Gritty meets much religion.

There is another story of a blind man in John chapter 9. This man has been blind since birth. When Jesus heals the man an astonishing thing occurs, no one gets excited enough about his sight to make a big deal about it. Instead, he is dragged before the Pharisees, his family and his neighbors and is verbally pummeled by them all. His neighbors don't believe him, his parents abandon him, the Pharisees attack him emotionally and physically. They try to intimidate him and he ends up, in his naiveté and ignorance, intimidating them. When your nitty gritty meets Jesus and then meets religion you become the intimidator. That is always the way it is folks. A real relationship with Jesus is always better than a relationship with a religion. Rules never satisfy like the joy that comes when the Spirit of God fills you and enlivens you. And, that is intimidating. Life with Jesus is meant to be lived. But, when the Nitty Gritty of our lives meets religion life is smothered, dissected, inspected or condemned.

Tony Compolo is a Christian, a sociologist, a college professor and a gifted speaker, so he gets asked to go and give presentations all over the place. One time

he was called from his east coast home to go to Honolulu. Now if you have ever flown from the East coast to Honolulu you know what happens to your time clock. He was in the hotel the first night and he woke up, wide awake, a little bit before 3 in the morning. His body said "It is 9 o'clock, time for breakfast," so he got dressed and went downstairs.

Nothing was open so he went outside from the hotel and wandered around a bit until he found a place, a diner, a real greasy spoon -- one of those places where you are afraid to open the menu because you're not sure what might crawl out? And there he was in that place, no one else was there. He ordered a cup of coffee, and then, in a weak moment, he also ordered a donut. And then this rather obese, unkempt, unshaven man -- named Harry -- that was working behind the counter came out, wiped his hands on his dirty apron, reached into the jar and gave Tony a donut. Tony wished Harry had given it to him in a different way, and yet there he was.

So he was sitting back, musing to himself and drinking his coffee and eating his donut when the door suddenly burst open and 8 or 9 rather boisterous prostitutes came in. Now Tony was even more uncomfortable. They sat down at the counter next to him, because there wasn't any other place, and he drank his coffee, tried to look inconspicuous, and listened to the conversation.

And one of the women said, "Tomorrow is my birthday, I'll be 39." And her friend said, "So what do you want from me? I suppose you want a party or something, maybe you want me to bake you a cake?" And this woman, whom he later found was named Agnes, said, "Why are you so mean? I don't want anything from you. Why would I want anything from you? I've never had a birthday party, and no one has ever baked me a cake, and why would I want anything from you? Be quiet."

Right then Tony got an inspiration. Soon the ladies left and he said to Harry, behind the counter, "Say do they come in here every night?" and he said, "Yes they do." And he said, "This one next to me?" and Harry said, "You mean Agnes?" and Tony said, "Yes, that's the one, does she come in every night?" And Harry said, "Same time just like clock work every night she is here." So Tony said, "What about if we throw a party for her, a birthday party? Tomorrow's her birthday." Harry began to smile a little bit and called to his wife who was back in the kitchen cooking, and said, "Hey, this crazy guy out here wants to have a birthday party for Agnes." And they said what a wonderful idea!

So the plans were made and everything was set for the party. The next night Tony came back to the same place, same time, and the place was decorated with crepe paper, and the sign on the wall said, "Happy Birthday Agnes." It was cleaned up and it looked like a different place. They sat down and waited and pretty soon

people began to trickle in. The word had gotten out on the street, prostitutes from all over Honolulu were filling up the place. The place was full and at about the appointed time Agnes and her friends came bursting through the door and they said "Happy Birthday, Agnes." Her knees buckled a bit, her friends caught her and she was stunned, speechless, touched. They led her over to the counter and she sat down. They said to her again "Happy Birthday," and Harry brought the cake out and her mouth fell open and her eyes began to fill with tears. They put the cake down in front of her, they sang happy birthday to her and Harry said, "Blow the candles out so we can have some."

Agnes just stared at that cake. Finally they convinced her to blow the candles out and Harry handed her a knife and told her to cut the cake. She looked at it and said, "Do I have to? let me wait a minute." And Agnes looked at that cake, so lovingly, like it was the most precious thing she had ever seen, a sacrament of love for her, and she said, "Do I have to cut it?" And Harry said, "Well, no, I suppose you don't have to cut it."

And then she said something even more strange. She said, "I would like to keep it for awhile - I don't live far from here. Can I take it home? I'll be right back." They looked at her with a puzzled look on their faces and said, "Sure, you can take it." She picked the cake up and Tony said she carried it like she was carrying the Holy

Grail in a sacred Cathedral and she walked out the door. There was silence, stunned silence, and Tony said he did something on the spur of the moment that he wondered about. He stood up and said, "What do you say that we pray?"

Now what an improbable picture this is. A Christian sociologist surrounded by every prostitute in Honolulu in a greasy spoon diner and he says, let us pray. But he did. A simple prayer. He prayed for Agnes that somehow she would meet Jesus, that somehow she would find salvation and that God would be good to her, especially on her birthday. He said Amen and the party resumed. Harry said to him, "Hey, I didn't know you were a preacher." And Tony answered, "I'm not a preacher, I'm a sociologist." And Harry said, "Well what kind of a church do you come from anyway?" Tony, inspired by God's spirit, said, "I guess I come from a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 o'clock in the morning." And Harry said, "No you don't, there's no such church like that, cause if there was," he said, "I would join it."

Why would the cook say that? And, there is no religion like that either. But there is a Savior like that and I happen to know him. Mark Twain once commented about a group of church people he knew. He said this about them, "They were good in the worst sense of the word. Christians do not condone unbiblical living, we are called

to redeem it. Has your Nitty Gritty ever met religion? If so you know what you get.

Here, we want to introduce your nitty gritty to Jesus.