

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2024
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, Psalm 15, James 1:17-27,
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

True Religion, Transformation, and Ministry

Good Morning! Our Collect of the Day, which literally “collects” and orders our common prayer in the liturgy, asks us today to “Graft in our hearts the love of your name; increase in us true religion; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works.”

What do you think “true religion means? I think it may be more helpful to think of it as “authentic religion.” In times past, continuing into our present day, we can find plenty of examples of unwholesome, destructive religion. The Inquisition, the Crusades, the Doctrine of Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and most recently the horror of the Holocaust and the ongoing violent conflict in the Middle East are just a few examples of the evil that can come out of disordered religion. And today, right here in the United States, we are seeing the rise of a particularly destructive, unholy union of religious doctrine and political power, white Christian Nationalism. People who are scared, afraid of change, afraid of losing power, and their niche in a rapidly changing

society, are justifying hateful attitudes, racism, and division, and throwing the mantle of religion over it all, religion that is divorced from the teaching and example of Jesus.

And yet there are other stories out there, too. Stories of people like Martin Luther King, whose faith led him to give his life in the service of racial justice. Of Dietrich Bonhoffer, the German pastor who gave his life to resist the evils of Nazism. Of Sojourner Truth, a former slave and powerful abolitionist whose faith led her to work tirelessly for justice for her people. Of the South African Anglican priest, Trevor Huddleston, whose religion compelled him to walk in the street to let young Desmond Tutu and his mother pass on the sidewalk, and tip his hat to them in greeting, showing respect, in a land where black people were routinely denigrated and treated as inferior. And there are countless nameless others, who through their transformation in Christ and being formed by his teachings and example, have practiced a religion of grace, integrity, and transforming power.

How then, do we define religion? The dictionary defines it as “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and

practices, as well as the service and worship of God and the supernatural”. We can say, then, that religion is concerned with the way people are in relation to the Holy, and how they express that relationship through ritual, doctrine and practice, both as individuals and in community. So what might our Collect of the day be getting at when we are asked to pray for the increase in us of true, authentic religion.?

First, authentic religion honors mystery. It doesn't claim to have all the answers, but lives into and honors the questions. It is not merely a truth claim that excludes others and their most cherished beliefs, but bows to the great mystery that is the Divine. The prophet Isaiah tells us “for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.” In our lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses asks the people to cling to the one God, in faith, to walk in the statutes that honor the One who is greater than us all. Authentic religion honors mystery. It puts the worship of the heart above mere adherence to doctrine.

True religion is not an exercise in becoming holy through merely following the rules, the letter of the law opposed to the spirit of the law. True religion grows out of a life that is deeply transformed by the

unconditional love of God. We can't grow in holiness and wholeness through our own strength, through our own efforts alone. We need to experience the abundant, extravagant love of God that Jesus taught and lived, which will work in our hearts so that we long to walk in paths of righteousness, truth, compassion, mercy, and love of neighbor. In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisees are highly critical of Jesus and his disciples because they didn't follow ritual rules regarding washing of hands, utensils, cups, and pots. Jesus rebukes them for giving so much importance to these outward signs, and using them to judge others, when they should be looking at what is in their own hearts, and cleave to the spirit of the Law, which is fidelity, love, mercy, and justice. He criticizes them for putting human tradition above the commandment of God. He proclaims boldly that nothing going into a person defiles or makes unclean, but it is what comes out of the human heart, evil intentions, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, slander, pride, that is defiling. Look beneath the surface, he is saying. It is not what you eat or wash that defines what is holy and what is not, but what comes out of the storehouse of your heart.

In the letter of James to the church at Jerusalem, we read that “every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights. He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures”. We are to “welcome the meekness of the implanted word that has the power to save our souls.” We are to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” and to bring forth the fruit of good works. Bringing forth this good fruit, then, comes from a heart that has been fed and nourished with the good word of God. True religion, then, brings together what we profess and practice with how we live in the world. True religion is gracious, and we don’t seek to force our beliefs on others. The late Madeleine L’Engle, author and Episcopal lay leader, famously wrote:” We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”

Finally, the letter to James gives us the standard by which to judge the truth and authenticity of our religion: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows

in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Religion that is mere ritual and intellectual assent to doctrine cannot save or transform us. It is incomplete; through it we can withdraw and become overly focused on ourselves. True religion links what we believe, what we hope, what stirs up love and devotion in us, with the great needs of the world. Our faith is grounded in the first and second great commandments, that we shall love the Lord our God with all our strength and all our will and all our mind, and we shall love our neighbor as ourselves. On this hangs all the law and the prophets. We love our neighbor, not by declaring the superiority of our religious practice, or by judging him, or forcing him into our way of thinking. No, we love our neighbor as ourselves through caring for the poor, binding up the wounds of those who are suffering, showing respect to those who have been cast out of society, and proclaiming the abundant love of God that is the hallmark of the Kingdom. The second half of the verse from James says that practicing true religion means that we will keep ourselves “unstained by the world.” Now the world as we know it can be filled with violence, greed, abuse of power and self-seeking. At the same

time, it is the good earth that God created, that was intended to be a paradise where the family of humanity would live in solidarity, abundance of life, and peace. So perhaps being “unstained by the world” means that we’re not to be governed by the prevailing cultural views that encourage us to live in our own strength, using the feeble light of our own limited perspective and vision, but we are to rely on the Spirit of God to enliven us and guide us.

I believe one of the best summaries of wholesome, heartfelt religious practice is found in the book of the prophet Micah, Chapter 6, verse 8: “He has told you, O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”. May we reflect on these words, and may they be to us a lamp to light our way, a sacred call, and an invitation to us all in the days to come. Amen.

