

“True Religion”
Sermon on Sunday, August 29, 2021

Dear church!

What is true religion? The question is answered succinctly at the end of today’s reading from the book of James. *“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”* It is a definition of religion that’s favored by hands-on people, by those of us who passionately want to make a difference in the world, by people with a strong social conscience and concern for others. It’s also a rejection or de-emphasizing of mere religious rituals, spiritual exercises or belief systems in favor of acts that express the love of God visibly. Like: helping the most vulnerable in society; caring for sick people; donating to organizations like Manna on Main Street; giving clothing away. The Apostle James says: true religion is Social Ministry pure!

I would like to add to this definition because, while it makes an important point, it is not entirely complete. In my view, we can learn most about religion by looking at the life and teachings of our Lord. For Jesus, it was always both: loving God and loving your neighbor; prayer and contemplation, but also feeding the hungry; listening to Holy Scripture but also doing what Scripture says we ought to do. One without the other doesn’t cut it. Both together lead to the experience of wholeness that true religion always inspires. In fact, the life of Jesus, if we pay attention, reveals that religion tends to disappear as a separate entity when we are transformed into true humanity. You can see that in the life of Jesus. Jesus prayed; he went to the synagogue; he learned the Torah. He checked all the religious boxes. Spiritual exercises remained important throughout his life. But read the gospels and you will discover that he never came across as a super religious man. In fact, he disregarded the Sabbath rule a few times in favor of helping people. He argued with the clergy. The religious aspect of his life became almost invisible and certainly understated because Jesus became such a complete human being. That’s what true religion will do every time: lead you to God, lead you deeper into life and make you a better human being. Aside from that, religion may stay happily in the background!

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the great American Jewish teachers in the last century had this to say: “The tragedy of religion is partly due to its isolation from life, as if God could be segregated. God has become an alibi for our conscience, for real faith. He has become a sort of after-life insurance policy.” (From the essay: No religion is an island.)

So, what this means is: **true religion always leads us deeper into life**, not away from it, at least not permanently. Remember what Jesus said? “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And we have so often foolishly misinterpreted this Bible verse. We have taken it to mean, “No-one comes to the father except through the Christian religion.” But Jesus never said that and certainly never meant it that way. When he said “except through me” he begged us, all of us – Christian, Jew, atheist - to partake in his experience of God and life: to accept the love of God and to love others; accept yourself as a human being and to find yourself by following “The Way, The Truth and The Life.”

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus argues again with the representatives of religion about their rules. Toward the end he says this: *“Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”* The context of this word are the Jewish purity laws that determine which foods are pure and kosher and which are not. For us Christians we are happily eating pork and beef (unless we are Vegetarians), and who don’t particularly pay attention to the “kosher” signs in the grocery store, this word of Jesus may not mean much for our understanding of faith and religion.

But think about it... it is rather strange! Wouldn’t you think that what goes into your body would make you sick, rather than what goes out – what your body has rejected and deemed unnecessary or bad for you? It’s a peculiar wisdom that Jesus proclaims here. What does it mean?

Number one: there is nothing inherently bad in this world. All of creation is good. Number two: how you process things is what matters; how you deal with the things you’re confronted with is what matters. What comes out of you, whether its love or hate, gratitude or bitterness, humility or hubris is what matters? It’s the proof in the pudding about who you are and who you have become as a human being, who you are as a spiritual child of God. True religion will always help you to process your life in holistic, positive, life affirming ways, because that’s who God is. Even negative experiences can be transformed into good. Your stomach breaks down what you eat and separates useful from not so useful, good from bad. Your soul breaks down what you experience and separates useful from not so useful, good from bad and it does even more: it heals. It’s the power of true religion and I am sometimes shocked by how many people don’t even recognize it. It’s hope for the world and hope for humanity. In Christ there is a Way and Truth and Life. Let’s embrace it! **Amen.**