

Sermon, Proper XVII

August 30, 2015

Are you religious? That may seem like a funny question to ask to a congregation of people who are in church. There is an assumption we are religious if we are here inside on a Sunday morning. But we may have some guests with us, exploring the Christian faith. Or even among those of us who are members and even regular attenders, at least some of us may not identify as “religious.”

There are some good reasons not to call yourself religious. Jesus pointed out some of them in the Gospel we heard read this morning. Religious folks can often be accused of being hypocritical or focused more on outward appearances than an inward change of heart. That is why many folks today, especially the demographic group known as “millennials,” identify as “spiritual but not religious.”

A spiritual person may focus more on being out in nature or appreciating art or being with dear friends as their way of being spiritual. Some may practice meditation or at least feel they should. Spiritual folks may investigate different world religions and pick and choose different parts that fit their spiritual sensibility. They may also explore New Age practices such as crystals, incense, and pyramids.

In my life, I have known different folks who identify as spiritual but not religious. Some have been among the finest people I know. At times, I have to admit, I have wondered why others identified this way. Is this shorthand for saying I am not interested in the demands of Christian faith? Have they been hurt by the church? Are they truly seeking and could the church and Christian discipleship be what they are looking for in their spirituality?

Other folks are not religious and they do not care much about being spiritual, either. They are another growing group of unchurched people-- atheists. Folks in this category are quick to point out why religion is not true and all the evils that religions have done over time. They focus more on the Crusades and the Inquisition than the founding of universities and hospitals and ministries for the poor.

You see, religion is responsible for many things, good and bad. And if we identify as religious folks, we need to be honest about our faith and our church; and reflect on what being religious means for us as individuals and what it means for us as a force for good in the world. Because otherwise, we can worry too much about things that are less important and miss out on true religion.

Religious folks can get preoccupied with all sorts of things. Few if any of them are necessarily “bad,” but they can distract from what really matters to God and why we gather to worship and pray and love and work in God’s name. In Jesus’ day, some of his co-religionist worried about washing their hands and their eating utensils in a certain way to prove they were keeping certain religious dietary

laws. Nothing is necessarily wrong with that, of course. Keeping kosher is a way for Jewish people to identify themselves as separate and faithful to God.

But here is what can become the problem with any outward form of religion—when we focus on these outward things disproportionately, we may use up our time and energy so that we do not remember to focus on more important issues. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus said it this way,

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

What are our particular religious rules today that bother us more than they should? I won’t presume to point out what yours might be (that is for you to think and pray about later). And upon reflection, I won’t share mine either, because it may make some of you wonder if I have been judging you. The point to remember is that when something bothers me in a religious sense—how we pray or worship or gather together-- it is a good sign for me to stop my criticism, pray, and ask why this particular issue bothers me. That answer may help us to grow as people of faith.

In addition, even if we are the most religious person around, i.e., we go to church weekly and believe the Creeds and do all the religious things we have been taught to do by our parents and the church; and yet have hate in our hearts, then all the religion in the world is not helping us. As someone has said, “If your religion makes you hate people, you are doing it wrong.”

So what *is* the point of being religious? Why come to church and follow spiritual practices like praying, tithing, reading the Bible, and doing good works? Why not just be spiritual and try to be a good person? Or why not be an atheist and write off religion as a fairy tale and religious people as misguided at best and hypocritical at worst? Wouldn’t we all be better off? Remember what John Lennon sang to us, “Imagine all the people, living life in peace.”

I’ll tell you why-- true religion saves our souls. Being religious, being faithful, binds us to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that inspires and guides us and helps us to fulfill the beloved community God intends for the world. Gathering together to pray and sing and worship; gathering together to hear ancient and holy scripture and conscientious and Spirit-filled preaching and teaching; and being called into the world to live differently according to what we learn from God’s message of justice and mercy and faithfulness; those aspects of being religious are the best hope for the world.

When religion has failed us through history, it is because religion was compromised by the world and lost its way. When religious folks used power to maintain their position, they were no longer practicing “true religion.” When religious folks and our leaders lost our way, we made an opening for people to revolt and try being spiritual instead or even atheistic or simply not to care about religion or anything. But each of those choices has problems, too. Without religion, we cannot

build community and offer purpose and grace to do what God intends in the world. That is what true religion can do.

James tells us,

“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.”

Without Scripture and the church, without religion, we would not automatically know that priority in life. But today around the world and throughout history, millions of people have practiced this type of religion by God’s grace. They often go unnoticed, but that does not mean their work and the difference it makes is not real. That is what our religion calls and enables us to do.

True religion does call us to change and to do what’s right—and more. The Christian religion also tells us that we cannot do these good things on our own, just as an act of will power. Our religion diagnoses a problem with us—sin. Often we just do what we want, when we want, because we want to. Sometimes that causes harm to others—and to us. In addition to this diagnosis, the Christian religion provides a cure—Jesus Christ. His example, his unjust death, and glorious resurrection, reveal what God wants, how the world resists God, and how God offers new life to us in spite of our sin. Religion reminds us of that truth and gives grace to us to follow Jesus’ example and join his religious movement to change the world.

When we gather from week to week, our worship and lessons and prayers and sharing in Holy Communion matter because they changes us over time and gives us grace to help us change the world. What does not matter about being religious is whether we are doing something “right” or not in the course of the liturgy. If you do not bow or cross yourself at the right time, do not worry. You can learn the tradition of how we do it; but always remember that is not the point. Doing it “right” in here is not true religion. Rather what matters is how what we do in here helps us to do right out there—to bring God’s love and justice, Christ’s forgiveness and grace to the world around us.

So I am glad to identify as religious. I am glad for the fellowship it makes me a part of—with all of you and with people around the world. I am glad for the message of grace that we remember and celebrate and take part in from week to week. And I am glad for the Christian hope that we embrace because of the faith of Jesus we share. Religion like that helps me to change as a person and helps me to focus on what really matters as God continues to bring change to our world. Thanks be to God.