

14 Pentecost
August 29, 2021

Listen again to the words of today's Collect. "Lord of all Power and Might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works. .." The Collect of the day is the prayer appointed each Sunday before the reading of the lessons. The collect sets the theme for the readings. In other words, the prayer "collects" the main idea for the day.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' theme is to contrast "true religion" from "false religion." We heard the story about a group of Pharisees who were accusing Jesus' disciples of ignoring or disregarding some long held religious customs. The Pharisees have not come down to us in history in the most favorable light. We know them to be in opposition to Jesus and the Pharisees are often portrayed as being narrow minded and inflexible. That reputation is not entirely fair or accurate. The fact is, the Pharisees were not "bad" people. The word Pharisee itself means "separated ones." Pharisees wanted to be good people. They wanted to be faithful Jews who were "separate" from all the other "bad" people. They truly tried to live lives that were faithful to God and not to live like all those Godless heathens in the world around them.

They did their best to live faithful and moral lives that honor God. They lived by a strict set of rules, and they committed themselves to maintaining traditional Jewish values. They applied the laws of the Old Testament to every single aspect of their lives. They went to Synagogue every Saturday, and they actually tithed 10%! These were not bad people!

In fact, the more we look at them, the more we might find ourselves having a lot in common with the Pharisees. Like them, we want to think of ourselves as being pretty good people who are trying to live life according to the rules. Like them, we try to be good citizens, who honor our past, uphold our traditions and try to do what we think the Bible tells us to. There is nothing wrong with any of that.

So why is Jesus so riled up and calling the Pharisees a bunch of hypocrites? We've all heard the phrase, "cleanliness is next to Godliness" but surely there must be more to this story than people not washing their hands before eating or using the wrong brand of dishwashing detergent to clean their pots and pans.

Here we have some Pharisees, some "good people" watching the disciples eating with unwashed hands and using some dirty bowls. But it's not really dirty hands or unwashed bowls that offend these "good people." What they are upset about is the fact that the disciples are violating long held religious traditions. The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why don't you have your disciples follow the rules and the traditions that have been a part of our "true religion" for generations?"

Jesus responds by giving a lesson on the meaning of “true religion.” He quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, “This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.

Jesus didn’t say the law should be abolished or rituals and traditions should be ignored. Throughout all his ministry Jesus affirmed that the law and the way of life as defined by the prophets was a gift from God and was meant to be diligently practiced. It’s the same today. We have doctrines, creeds, and traditions which set out and articulate what we believe as Christians.

But the Pharisee’s problem was that they were worshipping the doctrine and the tradition rather than worshipping God. They were depending not on God, but on their own abilities and understanding in how to practice “true religion.” They were setting themselves apart from others and seeing themselves better than others. Jesus is telling them, “Don’t be so caught up in the external practices that you lose sight of eternal qualities like love, justice, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Those are the qualities at the heart of true religion.”

The way we worship is one of the things that first drew me to the Episcopal Church. I love the symbols and the traditions for all they communicate and represent. Kneeling for prayer reminds us of our unworthiness before God. The hour we worship together on Sunday symbolizes our acknowledgment that all of life belongs to God. Our Book of Common Prayer has been around since 1549 and its prayers and worship services have comforted and inspired millions of people. Those are all parts of our tradition, and they are good.

It’s not symbols or traditions that Jesus is criticizing but it’s the danger that the symbols or traditions become what is most important. Christians don’t worship symbols or traditions. We worship the one living and eternal God.

Jesus is saying, “True religion begins from within—from the heart. This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” For the Pharisees, it was the external—the meticulous following of rules that represents “true religion.” But before we get too critical of the Pharisees we should take a look at our own lives. We might find we have a few things in common with them. There is a real tension in society today and even in our own denomination between tradition vs. change, inclusion vs. exclusion, clean vs. unclean, haves vs. have nots, law vs. Gospel.

“True religion” is simply practicing that which is most important to God. All our rules and all our rituals don’t make any difference if our hearts are not fixed on and abiding with God and his claim on our lives. It is the heart that matters. It is from our hearts that true religion flows and becomes visible and tangible.

So how do you and I begin to practice “true religion.” Jesus gives us the answer. “Thou shall love the Lord thou God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This

is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.” There you have it—true religion. How well are we living into and practicing true religion?

Perhaps we should begin by having a little heart examination. Do you have a healthy heart today? Or is your heart hardening to God and to the needs and the hurts of others and to His creation? “True religion” means having compassionate hearts, not hearts blocked by selfishness, hatred, prejudice, or indifference. Practicing “true religion” is about having hearts that are open and welcoming to the stranger and those “different” from us. “True religion” builds bridges, not walls. “True religion” means having large hearts that are alive and pumping out love, joy, thankfulness, forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. In the words of today’s Collect, true religion nourishes us with all goodness and enables us to bring forth the fruit of good works. What comes out of our hearts either separates us from God and one another or it draws us closer to God, to others, indeed to all of His creation. How’s your heart this morning?

In Holy Baptism, God calls us to love one another, to reconcile with one another and to proclaim the Good News that God has come among us. May our prayer be that we experience “true religion” that comes from the heart and is revealed as we “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.” May our prayer be that we experience “true religion” that comes from the heart and is exhibited in our lives as we “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.” And the people respond humbly, from the heart, “We will, with God’s help.”

Amen.