

## 17 B Sermon: Religion – Generous and “True.”

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. Amen.

It's not often I start off referencing the collect in my sermon (in fact I think this may be the very first time). Maybe that's because my homiletics professor used to joke that “if you ever have a hard time preaching on the scriptures appointed, you can always fall back on a brief homily about the ‘collect of the day.’” But I really like today's collect, not because it gets me out of addressing difficult scriptures, but because it sums up, in so many ways, the beauty and challenges of our appointed readings, and it asks God to keep us on track with what is right and good and true. But interestingly enough, the good, right and “true religion” to which we strive has nothing to do with being morally superior to other people, or being comparatively pure, but rather with having a love, generosity and good works orientation, vis a vis other people.

It's not God that insists we achieve moral perfection or religious purity, it is we, and too often our religious and political leadership, that do. And we do it not to please God, as much as to please ourselves, and our perceived “superiors.” I'm pretty sure this gets ingrained in us at an early age, as soon as we perceive how vulnerable we are. We want to please our parents and others who hold power over us, and help us survive, because then we feel safer. Of course some of us receive no or negative feedback or attention from the adult role models in our lives, and sometimes that conditions us to act out in negative ways, just to be seen and known.

How many of you sometimes feel like religious frauds? I certainly do. Sometimes I wonder if I am ever really a “doer of the word” and not just a “hearer:” one of those religious hypocrites that Jesus, and we all, rail against upon occasion. I mean there are times when I can be as judgmental, pious, and yes, snide and vindictive against representatives of the “religious right” who I perceive as being hostile to me and my community, as I claim they are against me. I mean, you should have heard me while I was listening to some of our politicians debate the other night! (Actually, on second thought you shouldn't!)

Each of our scripture readings today, at some point, lift up humility and patience. In Deuteronomy, Moses, says, “show your wisdom and discernment... but take care and watch yourself closely...” The psalmist contemplates. “LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle? ...Whoever...speaks truth from the heart... (without) guile... and (whoever) does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.” Some of my favorite (and most difficult) biblical passages and challenges come from the Book of James, “... let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness... if any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” And all these exhortations lead up to our gospel passage today in which Jesus confronts the Pharisees.

In this passage, I imagine that Jesus must have been very calm and collected, not on one of his tirades, because that would have made him seem much weaker and petty. And I am also going to imagine that the Pharisees were actually sincere in their concerns and quite bewildered and curious about Jesus and his disciples. (I need to practice my generosity of spirit). They truly believed that the ritual forms that had been passed down over the generations were vitally important. After all, their salvation history, the stories passed down in scripture, drew very clear links between their failures of faith and their repeated failures in the political and national spheres. When you read Hebrew scriptures the authors, often prophets, draw clear associations between their failure to obey Yahweh and God's use of other powers to chastise and purify the Jewish people. Time after time, Israel and Judea are conquered, by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans. They go into exile, as prisoners in foreign lands, and as a result they have found ways to

ritualize and maintain their identity as the people of God, so that when God's anger is assuaged, they can return to their "home" and rebuild their identity, both structurally and spiritually.

As a result, over the centuries, Judaism had developed not only the laws written down in scripture, but a whole panoply of practices that clarified and specified how many of the rather vague and unspecific "ordinances" were to be carried out. They were terrified that they might not be fulfilling the laws properly, so highly detailed traditions, such as various washing routines referred to today, were developed. These practices would eventually become a veritable prison, so Jesus sets out to free any who would listen from them.

Perhaps it is not unlike the unresolved traumas that propel all of us at times, and some of us pathologically and all the time, to cling to routines, values, world views, and political identities that make us feel safe, or superior. A child growing up in an abusive home may take on neurotic behaviors that give a sense of comfort, even a familiar pain, in an effort to be or feel alive. A traumatic loss can lead to superstitious or unconscious habits in an effort to avoid a perceived association between a behavior and a "consequence." Some are extreme scenarios. We're all familiar with examples of people hoarding, or performing self mutilation, or shutting themselves down socially or emotionally just to create an imagined safety.

How many of you have seen the movie, "Children of Men?" In the near future, humanity has been plagued with infertility. No human child has been born for well over a decade and the resulting panic causes a total restructuring of British society into an apocalyptic tyranny that tries to maintain order in the ensuing chaos. Of course all sorts of scapegoats for the tragedy are identified, many of them based on racial and cultural differences. As a commentary on present day xenophobia and hyper-nationalism, foreigners of all sorts are relegated to internment camps. And in the midst of this, a poor black immigrant woman (a virgin Mary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century) is discovered to be pregnant by a subversive group, who tries to smuggle her out of England to a perhaps mythological sea vessel that is a lone sanctuary of hope for the future of humanity. In the midst of the social chaos, new religious sects flourish, and we get to see all kinds of sometimes-humorous religious oddities, which are nevertheless hauntingly familiar. They engage in what many of us might call neurotic practices, thinking and hoping that God may take mercy on them as a result.

What I love, however, is how in the Epistle of James, and the Gospel of Mark, we are reminded that our pathological fears about God and what She wants, are all unfounded. James starts right off, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." We are born, "so that we would become a kind of first fruits...."

It reminds me of the line from one of our hymns, taken from the first letter of John, "In him there is no darkness at all." In our collect we call God, "the author and giver of all good things." Only good things are from God. The bad, the evil, the painful, the destructive, are all things that result from our all too human condition. We fear, so we control. We fear so we grasp and possess. We fear, so we defile. We fear, so we objectify, conquer, and destroy.

In Mark's gospel, the Pharisees come to Jesus, along with the scribes and they had taken such comfort in the highly specified way of washing their hands, that they were horrified that Jesus and his disciples didn't do exactly the same. It's not that their hands were caked in mud, it's that they didn't wash "according to the tradition of the elders." After all Jesus was being called Rabbi, and if they didn't follow the minutia of the law, Israel and Judea were then again in danger. I mean, they might *never* overcome Roman rule, or things could get even worse (and they did.) But Jesus says, "Come on! Don't you get it? Our whole problem is that we are treating God as a punishing being! We are acting no differently in essence than all the surrounding cultures that engage in all kinds of brutal and bloody sacrifices to their foreign gods, because they fear them in the worst ways."

“...in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” And anyone who knows me, or heard me preach these past weeks, knows how I feel about “doctrine.”

“We cannot defile ourselves by what we put in our mouths, nor how we do so. Our problem is with what comes out of our mouths. Our problem is that we are defiled by what we hold in our hearts and how we treat others and speak to others as a result – with judgment, lust, covetousness, ego: all of which are rooted in fear – fear that we will not measure up, that we will not be successful, that we will not win, that we will not be loved!”

In this encounter Jesus models for us a fearlessness, a generosity that is life-saving and love-oriented. He’s not cussing them out. He is offering them, us and those others who are listening-in another option: a freer option, a richer option, a life-giving option! That’s what we have before us today. I don’t know about you, but given our world today, I’m going to need this community of faith to remind me and hold me accountable to this truth. I am as vulnerable as any of you to lose my generosity of spirit in our current political climate (especially within my own family). Yes I need to hold fast to my convictions and model a fearless generosity in my politics, but I also have to do that in my relationships. Help me LORD. Lift the veil of righteousness. Lift the burden of “certainty.” Lift up the Spirit of generosity, so that my heart might be your heart; my will - your will; and my religion, your “true religion.”