

“The Heart of Real Religion”

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Pentecost 15



Jesus giving the Farewell Discourse to his eleven remaining disciples after the Last Supper, from the altarpiece Maestà by Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1308-1311.

Readings

Mark 7:5-8

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

The Pharisees and religion scholars asked, “*Why do your disciples brush off the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?*”

Jesus answered, “*Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull’s-eye in fact:*

*These people make a big show of saying the right thing,
but their heart isn’t in it.*

*They act like they are worshiping me,
but they don’t mean it.*

*They just use me as a cover
for teaching whatever suits their fancy,
Ditching God’s command
and taking up the latest fads.”*

James 1:27

from the *New Revised Standard Version*

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

If someone were to ask you in the context of a casual conversation, “Are you religious?” what would be your answer? It’s a slightly different question from “Are you a Christian?” though I suppose I would give the same answer, which is “I don’t know. It depends on what you mean by that.” For a community like ours, a gathering of progressive liberal types who are likely to tiptoe quietly around the elephant in the room that we call “dogma,” being asked a question like this might make us sputter. “Well, I kinda, sorta go to church a lot, but it’s not really a church, or rather it’s a different kind of church . . . I mean, it’s a place where everybody is welcome. I can’t really explain it; you should come sometime!”

We use the word “religion” in so many different ways. Sometimes we use the adverbial form. I might say to you that I walk each day “religiously,” and by that I mean I am in the habit of walking, and it is a habit that I have bound myself to. I wouldn’t not want to do it. There is an internal sense of conviction about it. It’s not an external rule, but an internal one that I’ve chosen for myself. And when something like that is internalized, we are less likely to violate it.

I often hear it said that someone is a “non-religious” Jew, or a “non-religious Muslim,” which I take to mean that someone may be culturally or ethnically from one of those traditions, but does not necessarily participate in the practices of that faith. They do not feel bound by the dictates of a particular dogma or tradition—in this case an external rule—and it has not become internalized. So to be “religious,” used as an adjective, is to bind oneself (in this case) to the external rules of a faith tradition. And to follow some sort of habit “religiously” is to bind oneself to an internal decision to do something or other. In either case this idea of “binding” follows the Latin root of the word, which is how we have come to know “religion” in general. Which leads us to a more precise question: “Are you bound by a religious tradition?” to which you or I would likely respond, “Well heavens no!” I guess we’d view ourselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and yet here we are, week after week after week, attending “religiously” the Community Congregational Church, listening to an authorized minister of the United Church of Christ. But we’re not religious. “You should really come sometime. You’ll like it!”

There is a major theme running through the gospels that has Jesus, this young rabbi who in contrast with the other religious people of his day, speaks with authority. And when we think of religious people at the time, we’re most familiar with the Pharisees, though there were many other groups. We know more about the Pharisees though, because Jesus seems to reserve his most scathing language for them. He continually calls them out for their hypocrisy, for standing on the street corners making a big show of their prayers, following every external rule and regulation, punishing infractions, with nothing internal to back up their beliefs. He calls them names like “whitewashed sepulchers” or a “brood of vipers.” The point is that they have bound themselves to an external set of standards, their own form of dogma, but that is as far as it goes. Their hearts, their beings, who they are, is a far cry from whom they portray themselves to be. They are personas, not people, and their post-modern counterparts are likely the reason we sputter when someone asks if we are religious. Without naming names, the list is long: televangelists, evangelical leaders, leaders of conservative religious/political movements, priests and cardinals

that we read about in the news . . . aren't they religious? Do they not behave religiously? Do they not subscribe to a dogma that was meant to represent everything they have violated? Are you religious? At this point, we might just as well all run screaming from the room.

The New Testament epistle of James is commonly thought to be associated with the James who was the brother of Jesus and leader of the group of followers in Jerusalem in the post-Jesus era. It's often called the "church" in Jerusalem, but it's a group that predates the church as we know it. It was really a gathering of Jewish people who were just trying to do the things that Jesus did. They weren't organized around dogma at this point; they were organized around practice. It was over the next couple of centuries, as the movement spread throughout the Roman Empire, that its leaders became more concerned with doctrine, with councils, with decisions about who was right, who was wrong, who was in, who was out, which books were in, which were out. It was a far cry from the simple words, "Love one another as I have loved you." "This is how everyone will know that you are my followers, by the way you love each other." You see, Jesus wasn't all that religious in the way we think of the term. He was about *agape* which is "love that acts." This is why his brother James might say "be doers of the word, and not hearers only," or "faith without actions is dead."

"Real religion is this," James says, "to care for the orphans and widows." In other words, to be religious is to DO SOMETHING. It is about the care and concern we give to the world's most vulnerable people, not a set of ideas to which we adhere; not a bunch of rules that we bind ourselves to. "Real religion" is keeping oneself "unspotted by the world." In other words, it is about going against the flow of culture, especially when that flow is one of dominance, control, violence, xenophobia, genocide, inequality, insensitivity, or oppression. That flow, by the way, has become a torrent.

For those of you who follow us on Facebook, over the last week, we've been posting links to things you can do: causes and organizations that are literally doing something about the refugee crisis, feeding the hungry, or rescuing people in Haiti. A hurricane is making landfall. Wildfires are burning. ICUs are overflowing. People are being evicted. It is overwhelming to think about. The idea of these posts is not to make you feel like you have to do everything, or like you must diffuse your attention and resources to a thousand things (once you do that, there will be a thousand more). The idea is to find one thing and do it. Just one little thing. Today it might be donation. Tomorrow it might be demonstrating on a street corner, or buying someone a sandwich, or putting on your mask. Choose a loving action every day. Bind yourself to love, and do not be afraid to do so. It will take you to places you've never been before. It will take you to the green growing edge of what it means to be a religious person. And when someone asks you if you're religious, you can answer them and tell them why.

