

Proper 17-B  
Sept. 1-2, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

“Increase in us true religion...” We just prayed those words from the collect – the prayer that comes near the opening of our service. Every time I pray those words (at least once a year for the last 50 years or so that I’ve been an Episcopalian) it causes me to pause and think about that phrase “true religion.”

I learned from a quick Google search this week that True Religion is a also brand of designer jeans. But that’s not what I had in mind here.

What are we praying for when we ask God to increase in us “true religion?” What do those words mean? In this time in which we live, and in our Pacific Northwest culture where people often say they are ‘spiritual, not religious,’ it can sometimes be a challenge to introduce ourselves to others as religious people.

So let’s begin with the word ‘religion.’ Its meaning, from the Latin *religare* has to do with binding. So we might say that our religion binds us to God – and also binds us to one another in community. ‘True’ is about being authentic – something in our core that helps us to operate with integrity as we move through life.

It was interesting this week to listen to the many tributes to both Senator John McCain and Aretha Franklin, known to many of us as the Queen of Soul, both of whom died recently and have been honored and remembered by many. Both of them were huge players on the American stage, one through military heroism and many years of political service, and the other a gifted musician, civil rights advocate and woman of deep spirituality.

As I listened to what others said about both of them, the tributes really focused on their integrity – their generosity –their loyalty and their ability to bring people together in different ways. (You might fall it R E S P E C T.) Those traits might also speak to what we mean when we talk in another context about ‘true religion.’ They are traits that grow out of our relationship with God and one another.

I think our readings today help us explore the idea of true religion from different their vantage points. Deuteronomy begins with the importance of the Law in Judaism. In that view, law is at the center of life with God, not as an endless series of burdensome regulations, but a way of bringing holiness into all of life by honoring and being in relationship with God. The law is life-giving. It is important to honor and keep the law because by doing so one honors God and this forms a backbone of Judaism.

But as we move into the Gospel from Mark, there is a bit of a dust-up between the Pharisees and Jesus over a portion of the law about washing one's hands before a meal. It isn't simply the kind of hand washing we do before a meal to get rid of germs, but instead a ritual, prayerful hand-washing. Some of the disciples have been seen eating without this hand-washing ritual.

Jesus' point wasn't to denigrate the ritual, but rather to point out that there can be a disconnect between the meticulous practice of religious actions and the authentic relationship with God that is the reason for the ritual. Perhaps this ritual, which is a means to an end, has become an end in itself and could simply be going through the motions. That can happen in any religious context, even our own. We have a richness of spiritual practices that form us and draw us to God, but they are a means to an end at an end in itself.

Jesus seems to be saying that it's more important to pay attention to the things that we harbor within us – those impulses toward selfishness, or deception or the things we say about others or our unfaithfulness. Those things we often bring to God in confession, Those things for which we ask forgiveness and which need to be dealt with.

Sometimes in children's liturgies we've done a form of confession where each person chooses a small stone to represent what we are confessing to God and hold that stone through the service. When we get to the confession, each person puts his or her stone into a big bowl and we pour water over them at the absolution to symbolize the sin being washed away.

One weekend we were doing this at Camp Cross and I chose a stone—a beautiful, smooth stone that had been washed for years by the waters of the lake. When the time came to put the stone in the

bowl with the others, I had to pause for a moment before parting with it. I wanted to keep it in my pocket and feel its smooth surface.

But I think that reluctance also represented the need to give up the things it symbolized—those parts of my life that I needed to confess and accept forgiveness for. The things I offered for that particular ritual of washing. Part of me wanted to hang on a little longer. This ritual was really a practice of the heart. A practice that enriched both our self-understanding and also our acceptance of the forgiveness that was offered.

True religion makes those connections between our worship, our ritual, and what is going on in our hearts and lives. It encourages us to be honest and to face into those disconnects that are simply part of being human.

And the way we continue to live out the daily life that is part of who we are is where we have the opportunities to practice true religion out in the open. In our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhood, in our choices and our challenges.

The Letter of James is a piece of scripture that will hear in coming weeks. It's kind of a unique book in the New Testament and not always the easiest to read. It's a series of teachings on Christian life – exhortations to live in ways that show forth what we believe. It can be pithy and challenging, but also intriguing. It's kind of a New Testament wisdom book. And today we start close to the beginning.

I think this is my favorite part of the letter because in just a few verses it draws together several important pieces. It begins with a reminder that all that we have and all that we are comes from God. A reminder that we have a mission in this life live out what God has given us – the very gift of life.

Then the teaching about what to do with that life begins: Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase (or loose-limbed translation) of this says: “Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.”

We know that we're living in pretty contentious times. There is a level of often angry rhetoric both in our public life and sometimes on social media and maybe even sometimes among friends. “Lead

with your ears, follow up with your tongue and let anger straggle along in the rear.” Good counsel for our times. Maybe some teaching that will lead us to gentle down the conversation and practice deeper listening both to one another and to God.

I had a consulting job in another diocese when I served on the bishop’s staff that involved going into a very divided and conflicted parish with another person and spending more than two days simply listening to people who wanted to tell us about their pain. They came in groups of two or three. We prayed at the beginning and end of the time and the rest of the 30 minutes or so, we simply listened to what they wanted to tell us. It was an amazing experience. An incredibly a healing time.

Often when we listen carefully to another it becomes holy listening. Something that opens a space for the other – space for conversation, understanding, empathy. It might even be a sign of true religion.

But there is more, according to James. This religion – this thing that binds us to God and to one another, has an active side that calls us to love others as God does. James boils this down to caring for widows and orphans in their distress, but it’s safe to say this is just the tip of the iceberg. Peterson’s version of this is “Reach out to the homeless and the loveless in their plight.”

True religion. It’s more than designer jeans. It is our vocation – a life shaped by God, steeped in prayer, called to giving ourselves away as part of our love for God, and a way that the Good news, the gift that we are given, becomes ours to give away.

May it be so.