

September 27, 2020

Our gospel reading today is a little out of sequence, so I need to fill in the story a little bit.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem, he entered riding on a donkey, the people shouted Hosanna, Jesus went directly to the Temple, the center of religious life, he turned over the money tables, set the sacrificial animals free, he healed a lot of people and then went to the suburbs for the evening. A busy day...

Our gospel reading is the very next day, after all that hub bub... Jesus returns to the Temple and the religious authorities are not happy campers! Perhaps you could say they are steaming mad! And you can just hear the scolding, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

Confrontation numero uno, is all about authority; who's in charge... While the religious people make the assumption that they are... Jesus turns that on its head.

Jesus asks about John the Baptist. Was John's baptism of human origin, or was it of divine origin? This is the defining question about religion... And immediately the religious authorities argue with one another. Their human wants and desires are all in conflict and all on display. They are more concerned about politics than anything else...

They fear the consequences of answering the question either way, and so they admit they don't know. The very people who are supposed to know these things, don't know. And so, their claim to authority is eroded.

And, we then get this great little parable of the father with the two sons who are asked to work. One says he will not do the work, but he actually does. While the second son says he will do the work, but actually doesn't.

The parable highlights that the religious people, who say they are doing God's work, really aren't. Jesus calls them on their hypocrisy. And the question of authority is then completely turned upside down.

Today I'd like to do a little reflecting on faith and religion... I think this is at the heart of what Jesus is talking about.

Quick story... When I was doing my chaplaincy training, I ran into numerous instances of people who had been spiritually abused by some priest or pastor. I could give you many examples, but I'll give you two... One young woman who had been sexually abused by her step-father. And some pastor told her she was going to hell because she cursed at God.

Another man with severe diabetes, having lost both legs, an arm, numerous fingers, and going blind wondering if he even wanted to live, being told by a priest he was going straight to hell by even wondering that.

I could give you three more examples, but I won't, you have the idea... And perhaps you personally know someone with a similar story...

Now, to continue the story... Early in my ministry, after I had started at St Olaf, Facebook became a deal... So, I joined... And when you do that, you answer all kinds of questions about yourself. They want to know where you live, where you grew up, where you worked, schools, hobbies... And there was also a question about religion. Was I religious?

The question made me stop in my tracks, and I left it blank. A friend of mine who is a Pastor in the Cities noticed that I didn't answer the question and he wondered if I missed it. I said I hadn't and left it at that... He followed up by asking if I was embarrassed to be Lutheran. I said, absolutely not, I'm proud of being Lutheran. He then suggested I should say so. And that made me start thinking...

I then responded to him with a longer answer. I told him I considered myself a person of faith. I then told him that I think of faith as questions and religion as answers. And sometimes religion does a great job of answering questions; sometimes those answers are life giving and helpful...

And unfortunately, sometimes those answers are hurtful. I told him that from my experiences in chaplaincy training, I'd seen lots of people who were spiritually abused. I'd seen lots of people who were raised in a Christian tradition but would never going back to church because they were hurt. I've seen religion hurt people...

My friend sadly agreed...

Now, there is a cultural shift happening. People are suspicious about religion... There have been tons of headlines about corrupt religious leaders. Perhaps you've noticed that church attendance is down from where it was 15 / 20 years ago... Not just in our church, but across the whole country...

There is a rising number of people who claim to be spiritual, but not religious. According to a pew research study done in 2014, 38% of people aged 30 to 49, claimed to be spiritual but not religious. And that number continues to rise...

Personally, I've come to the view that it's not religion so much that is the problem, as much as it's a reaction to that "human origin" kind of religion. Religion infected with human sin... A kind of religion that is about human egos and power... A kind of religion that is hypocritical, political and not real, genuine or authentic. And when people see hypocrisy, they run the other direction.

One reason I love being Lutheran, is that we confess our hypocrisy every week-- it's called our confession and forgiveness. We know right off the bat we are sinners in need of forgiveness... We are humbled immediately...

In our little parable, Jesus is essentially saying the religion being practiced in the Temple isn't cutting the mustard. They say they doing it, but it's not getting the job done. It's not life giving... In fact, Jesus says directly, the sinners are going to heaven ahead of the religious people.

Authentic and genuine religion always has to be humble and discerning what is of “divine origin;” what is healing and “life giving.”

It’s the difference between setting someone free, verses piling on the shame. It’s the difference between belonging, verses casting out... It’s the difference between joy and fear... It’s the difference between meaning and purpose, verses despairing... It the difference between hopeful and hopeless. It’s the difference between integrity, verses hypocrisy... It’s bearing the cross to love your neighbor; it’s walking the walk...

Do you see these differences? It’s that covetous human side of us, the sinner in us that corrupts religion... and I’m so sad to say it does happen.

In our gospel reading, Jesus says that John the Baptist came in the way of righteousness... It is living into the love and forgiveness of God...

The good news today, is that we have Jesus to point the way. We participate in church with all our questions and wonderings, we confess our sins, we hear forgiveness, we dwell in God’s word, we love one another, this is our life. This is our bearing and fundamentally, it is “life giving.” And frankly, I believe it because I’ve seen it.

And honestly, thanks be to God...

Amen