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Practicing True Religion
Isaiah 58:6-9; James 1:26-27, 2:14-26

The word "religion" comes from a Latin word which means "to bind together." Our religious faith, then, should hold our lives together, giving us stability in the storms of life, guidance in times of indecision, and the values and priorities that under-gird our lives. We need this stability in both good times and when our lives fall apart. Scottish preacher A. J. Gossip lost his wife on a Thursday afternoon. The following Sunday he climbed into his Aberdeen pulpit and preached one of the most stirring sermons of the 20th century. Entitled, "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" he answers those who had asked, "Has the loss of your wife caused you to lose faith?" Plaintively he answered, "Lose my faith? For God's sake, haven't I lost enough without losing that too?"

It is popular today to say, "I'm spiritual, but not *religious*." I understand what that means. We identify "religion" with the rituals, the rules, the do's and don'ts, but mere rituals and rules aren't satisfying. What we need is an experience of God and answers to life's questions. Jesus, in fact, criticizes a religion that focuses on rote repetition. He said, "When you pray, don't babble like the pagans who think they'll be heard for their many words." Then Jesus offers a prayer that is profound, but simple:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily
bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.

The early church later added the familiar benediction, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen." The forms of our faith – the discipline of worship, reciting the Lord's Prayer before we go to bed, saying grace, memorizing the 23rd Psalm are important, but not unless they help us more deeply connect with God, with one another, and with our neighbor in need.

Religious people can be misguided. Back in the fourth century, a man named Simon Stylites was driven to practice "authentic" religion. So he lived in seclusion for 10 years, praying and meditating. He then built a pillar 4 feet square and 10 feet high, and had his followers chain him to the pillar, where he continued to pray. But feeling he still wasn't removed from the evils of the world, he increased the pillar's height to 60 feet, where he lived for 30 years, utterly convinced that he was practicing true religion.

But does true religion remove us from the world? Shouldn't prayer prepare us for ministry? Aren't we called to "do justice and love kindness" as well as "walk humbly

with our God?" to love both God and neighbor. John testifies, "Anyone who does not love his brother or sister whom he sees, cannot love God whom He has not seen."

What does it mean to be truly religious? Surely it doesn't mean to belong to a polygamous cult, where the teachings and authority of the elders replace the teaching and authority of our Lord, where young girls are married off to men ten, twenty or even thirty years older. True religion shouldn't be reduced to certain experiences, to the claim that you're not a true believer unless you've had a dramatic, datable conversion. Nor should true religion be reduced to certain behaviors. I spent fourteen years in west Michigan, amid devout Calvinists, where stores and restaurants were closed on the Sabbath. When a friend of mine washed his car one Sunday, a delegation of neighbors informed him that he was on the slippery slope to perdition. His retort that "cleanliness was next to godliness," wasn't thought to be amusing.

But these examples are too obvious. Our authors worry about those of us who faithfully attend worship, who've memorized The Apostles' Creed, who pay our tithe, attend Bible Study, serve on a committee, and assume that that is all the Lord requires of us. Isaiah tells ancient Israel, "Stop bringing meaningless burnt offerings. Your evil assemblies have become a burden to me. When you spread your hands out in prayer, I hide my eyes from you . . . Stop doing wrong; learn to do right. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, Defend the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

The prophet we know as third Isaiah adds this, "Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen . . . to set free the oppressed, to share your food with the hungry, to shelter the poor wanderer, to clothe the naked and care for your own flesh and blood." Then James defines true religion in terms of our words, our hands and our hearts.

Listen to James: "Anyone who claims to be religious by talking a good game is self-deceived, full of hot air and only hot air." Management guru, Jim Collins, tells of a corporate office with a 160 employees which was plagued by turnover, low productivity, and absenteeism. Despite restructuring, strategic planning and highly paid consultants, the environment remained deadly. So Collins traced the source of the discontent and found that they led invariably to three people. Collins suggested that the three employees be transferred, and almost immediately the atmosphere changed, turnover stopped and productivity increased because of the words of just . . . three people.

Words are so important. So Scripture cautions us, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs." Proverbs tells us how to deal with an adversary, "A gentle answer turns away wrath." Proverbs warns us about words in a home, "Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife." Then Proverbs tells us how to keep friends, "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. Before we go on the offensive, we ask: Is this really important, or are we simply seeking to vent?"

Words shape us, motivate us, teach us and inspire us. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, "I have a dream . . ." ring in our memories. Conversely, we all remember words that hurt us, angered us, or disillusioned us. Words are the inevitable overflow of our hearts, our inner beings, so let us measure our words carefully.

Authentic religion knows the importance of words, and also helps widows and orphans in their distress." When James writes, premature death was seen as God's judgment on human sin. So when a husband died, a widow was often subjected, not to care and compassion, but to reproach and scorn. She had few legal rights, no rights of inheritance, and received no public compassion. In the Roman world, orphans were abandoned or enslaved, forced to spend a lifetime as the lowest servants.

So James is critiquing a theology that blames the victim, that tells the accident victim implicitly, "This must be your fault," or the cancer patient, "You must have committed some sin. Otherwise God would heal you." James reverses a worldview that blames the poor for being poor. Instead, he says, care for the lowly, give aid to the poor, and extend dignity and justice to the outcast.

Back in the 1830s, white settlers in Georgia eyed the rich lands of the Cherokee Indians, and sought to take those ancestral lands by force. Having learned of the white man's culture, the Cherokees hired a lawyer and ultimately took the case as far as the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court agreed that the Cherokees had title to the land. But President Jackson reportedly laughed and said, "Let Chief Justice Taney stop me." And Jackson ordered Federal troops to Georgia to forcibly remove the Cherokees from their land and send them to Oklahoma on the infamous trail of tears.

One irony is that the wife of the Cherokee chief died in what is now Little Rock, Arkansas. She is buried near Central High School, which was the High School where Federal troops protected black students who made their way through howling mobs, jeers and the threat of violence, when that school was integrated.

Justice Stephen Breyer of the Supreme Court shared that illustration when our son, Erik, graduated a few weeks ago from the law school at American University in Washington D.C. Then Breyer said, "Law is for the purpose of insuring that justice is done and the rights of the weak are protected." That is also evidence of authentic religion – protecting and helping the weak and the powerless."

Then James adds one more quality of "authentic" religion, "keeping oneself unspotted from the world," a phrase that reminds me of a scene from an old Tony Curtin movie. As the scene unfolds, Curtis strolls through a bakery, impeccably dressed in a gleaming, white tuxedo. Suddenly a massive pie fight breaks out, and soon it is literally hailing cherry, blueberry and rhubarb pies. But Curtis remains unmarked until one last pie comes out of nowhere, splattering Curtis with bright red cherry juice. He couldn't remain "unspotted."

The ancient Jews realized that their greatest danger was assimilation, being drawn into the surrounding culture, thereby losing their distinctiveness. So their focus became "separation." Honoring the Sabbath, keeping kosher, practicing circumcision, wearing a hair-curl, celebrating Passover, and prohibiting intermarriage with Gentiles were all means of cultivating uniqueness, the sense of being set apart as God's people.

We Christians have done the same thing. Granted, there is a place for solitude and withdrawal from the world. Thomas Cahill records *How the Irish Saved Civilization* by keeping alive learning, culture and scholarship in their monasteries, reading and writing and studying while the rest of culture descended into the Dark Ages. It is sad to me that our culture focuses so heavily on "a-musement," which literally means "a" or "not" and "muse" or "thinking." Amusement is about not thinking!

So we Christians often say, "We should be in the world, but not of the world." My suspicion as to why the Dutch in West Michigan so strenuously cling to "honoring the Sabbath," is that they fled persecution in Europe. Fearful, coming to a new country and a new culture, wanting to protect their children, they focused on what they could control – on those rituals and rules that protected their distinctiveness.

But we keep ourselves "unspotted" from the world, not by fleeing from the world, but by being holy, by questioning the values of our culture in light of God's word, by being as Christ – a Christ in words, in deeds, in values, in love – to our neighbors. I recently read a remarkable testimony from a young 14 year old named Katie:

You guys keep talking about how youth don't amount to much. But as a youth let me explain what God is doing. I was home-schooled all my life, but I decided to go to public school to be with friends, to enroll in an art program, but mostly to get into daily contact with people who don't know God. God called us to be in the world, but not of the world. I think that we as Christians try so hard to be *not of the world* that we forget to be *in the world*.

We get isolated into our own bubble and we block the world out. I needed to get out of my Christian bubble and be in the world. Remember when *The Golden Compass* came out. Christians protested the movie because in the end of the trilogy, they are supposed to "kill God". But by not going to that movie, they stayed ignorant and inside their Christian bubble. They weren't of the world, but they weren't in it either. I saw that movie twice because I didn't want to be ignorant and prove the author correct.

A few days after that, a friend of mine at school was reading *The Golden Compass* books. I said that the movie was really good, and her response was, "aren't you religious?" I didn't know how to address the question because I believe that my faith is not a religion. Christianity isn't about just following the rules and doing good works. That's religion: doing good things to get to heaven. That is not Christianity. Because I

saw that movie, I was able to speak to this girl about the difference between Christianity and religion. I explained a little about my faith. I didn't "convert" her, but I planted a seed. All it took was escaping the Christian bubble and seeing a movie.

Last week one of my friends wrote an article for the school newspaper entitled *Jesus for President*. It talked about what Jesus would do if he became president of the U.S. Some atheists, who eat lunch with us, wanted to discuss the article. We then invited them to hang out with us and debate evolution and our beliefs. We shared our beliefs, tried to explain the Trinity, and spoke of feeling God's presence. Later, we laughed at how stupid we must have sounded, but we made him think. I eat lunch with Christians, but also with Alex, an atheist. We share our faith, but don't try to convert him. We're just his friends. We plant seeds.

I have put myself in the world, so I can plant seeds. God wants me to help change the world. My church is building orphanages and seminaries in Africa. We are giving clean water filters to people who are dying of disease in Cambodia. And that's just the start. We are in the world, so we can change it. Me and God are gonna change this world and make it better. Me and God are gonna help the homeless, cure AIDS and start churches. But I have to be IN the world to be used by God. So, I'm living in the world. I'm not of it - I'm an alien here - but I'm in it.

I just wanted to give you hope that the world is gonna change. Youth aren't hopeless. They're just living in the world instead of being in the Christian bubble. God is working through the youth. We're just doing it differently than you did. We're tackling the world at its level. You may not see the effects yet, but we're planting seeds and cultivating them. Seeds take time to become fruit. So don't give up on us. In a few years, you will see the effects of our actions. We're changing the world!

So what is authentic religion: 1) use your words to bless others; 2) Care for that neighbor in need, next door or globally, especially the one who's really hurting, and 3) be in the world, but not of the world, everyday trying to make a difference for Jesus Christ!