

Religion and Relationship

2018-09-09 - Year B - Pentecost 9-4 - The Rev. Christopher M. Klukas
Isaiah 35:4–7a; Psalm 146; James 1:17–27; Mark 7:31–37

- I used to have a fascination with green woodworking. This was an old technique of working with wood while it was still freshly cut allowing it to be worked more easily with hand tools. I read articles and books about it. I watched videos about it. I even bought a few tools.
- But as much as I came to know about this technique, I never actually put it into practice. I never made anything with it.
- If you really want to know something, you can't just fill your head with knowledge about it, you have to put it into practice.

Deceiving Ourselves

- The same is true of God's word. In the Epistle this morning St. James tells us to be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.
- How is this self deception?
 - We can be lulled into a sense of comfort that by resting in our religion we have found salvation. "I go to church so I'm OK." This is a passive sort of religion.
 - Similarly, as one commentator says, "It is possible to be unfailingly regular in Bible reading, but to achieve no more than to have moved the book-mark forward: this is reading unrelated to an attentive spirit. The word is read but not heard."¹
- But our God is active, and he desires active religion. He wants us to actively go out and serve, he wants us to be active in resisting the temptations of the world.
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17. "All Scripture is breathed out by God...that the man of God may be complete..."
- The Bible is intended to change us, to have an impact on our lives. Just like the image of the mirror in today's passage (v. 23-24) it is intended to show us who we are now and help us become who we are called to be. I can't imagine shaving without a mirror!
 - When we read the scriptures, we must read them to apply them.
 - Our faith, the things we read in the Bible, should permeate every part of our lives. How we work, how we parent, how we engage in friendships, how we treat people at the grocery store or restaurant. All of it matters, and our faith should shine through all of it.

Empty Religion

- The word "religion" comes from middle English with the original sense referring to life under monastic vows, "the religious." It has roots in a Latin word which means "obligation, bond, or reverence."
- There is a sense in which this is true. Religion does oblige us in various ways. Some people still talk about our "Sunday Obligation." These religious obligations are intended to draw us closer to God, but it is entirely possible to "go through the motions" without letting the motions impact your life. This is what we mean when we talk about "empty religion."
 - Even worse, religion without faith can inoculate us against faith! We can start to believe that because we faithfully do a certain list of things, we are in with God. This is what is known as "works righteousness". It is an attempt to earn our way into heaven through religious deeds. The only way to get to heaven is through what Jesus has done for you!
 - Religion is a good and necessary thing, but unless it is coupled with a living relationship with the living God it is useless! Like a car spinning its tires on a giant treadmill!

¹ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 64–65.

- “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord...’” Matthew 7:21-23.
- Similarly, we can believe all of the right things, and if we don't let those beliefs change the way we live our lives, none of it will matter. “Even the demons believe.” (James 2:19)

Lively Faith

- So how do we keep from deceiving ourselves with empty religion? It all has to do with having a relationship with the living God, and letting his Word impact our lives.
 - Thomas Cranmer called this a “lively” or living faith. He wrote “Be sure of your faith, [test] it by your living, look upon the fruits that [come] of it, mark the increase of love and charity by it towards God and your neighbor, and so shall you perceive it to be a true and lively faith. If you feel and perceive such a faith in you, rejoice in it, and be diligent to maintain it, and keep it still in you; let it be daily increasing, and more and more be well working, and so shall you be sure that you shall please God by this faith” (Homily on The True and Lively Faith).
- I went to church for a lot of years before I figured this out. I knew all of the right Sunday school answers and my attendance card was full of gold stars but I didn't know Jesus personally.
 - The major difference for me came at a youth retreat when I was about 16 years old. During the ministry time at that retreat, one of the adults counseled me saying that I was relying on the faith of my parents and challenged me to own my faith for myself.
 - I prayed quietly in the pews and turned my life over to the Lord. That was the beginning of my “lively faith.”
- God wants a relationship with you! If you have never taken the time to get to know God personally, there is no day better than today!
- Now if you already do have this kind of relationship, you need to deepen it each and every day through prayer and the reading of scripture.
 - James 1:25 - “The one who looks into the perfect law...and perseveres...will be blessed.”
 - “Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow.”
- If you have never read the whole Bible, do it!, but don't just be a hearer of the word, be a doer of the word. Don't just READ scripture, MEDITATE on it, let it become IMPLANTED in you (v. 21). Put away the sin in your life for good and let God's Word literally become a part of who you are.
- Whatever you do, please don't just go through the motions. When you come to church, don't just come for the sake of coming, come to worship the living God. When you come forward to receive communion, cherish the moment and know that you are feeding on the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- In the truest sense of the word “religion” bind yourselves to Jesus.