

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 30, 2015  
**"THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE"**  
By Mary Anne Biggs

James 1:17-27 ~ Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Last week six people came before us and did a courageous thing. They joined our church. They made promises to us, and we made promises to them, and I know in the depth of my heart that we did not have our fingers crossed behind our backs when we made those promises. We meant them and we will, with the help of God, do our best to live into them. But why do I say they were brave to do so ... well because it takes courage to commit ... to trust ... and to believe in the good intentions of others.

It's not always a simple process to decide which church to join ... long gone are the days when denominational ties were handed down through the generations. So, how do you find a new church home? What's most important? The music? The preaching? The location? The people? I suppose everybody looks for something different, but as I said last Sunday, for the most part, I think folks look for a place they can feel at home with the people and at home with God. When John and I were looking for church homes we were amazed by the variety of styles. Yet, each was sincerely connected with God.

When I was in seminary a classmate encouraged me to come visit his church, and it was as close to a fundamentalist Pentecostal church as I've ever seen. They had everything but the snakes. He told me that they didn't believe in having a printed order of worship because it limited the freedom of the Holy Spirit. He also told me that they didn't believe in having set rituals like other churches because they wanted to follow God's word instead of human customs. I went with him twice, and what I noticed was that the service was almost exactly the same both times ... in order ... in style ... in who was leading ... in what was said ... even in who fell out into the aisle and who danced on the pews. They didn't want to admit that they had set rituals of worship and a defined order, but they did. I have never seen a church that didn't. And that's fine, because I happen to think rituals are a good thing ... a necessary thing.

Every religion, in fact, every *congregation* has its culture ... its traditions, its styles, its ways, its rituals. When I read that Jesus had a run-in with the Pharisees complaining that they had "*abandon(ed) the commandment of God and held to human tradition*" (Mark 7:8), I didn't get it. What does Jesus have against tradition? The Pharisees were sincerely trying to follow the scripture, which they took seriously ... which they took literally. They added their own interpretations, of course, but don't we all do that? People who think they are following the word literally without interpreting it into their language, their style, their congregational culture are just fooling themselves. There simply is no church ... in our time ... exactly like the first churches because they lived in a very different time and place ... according to very different ideas and customs from our own. They had their traditions and we have ours. So why is Jesus complaining?

Psychologists, anthropologists, and theologians have long studied the phenomenon of human ritual. By "ritual," I mean any repeated ordered pattern of behavior. Our rituals tell us who we are and make us feel safe. They give us stability, consistency, and meaning. It's in our bones. We are creatures of habit. We ritualize everything. Our rituals may be conscious or unconscious ... intentional or accidental. But we follow them. We have set ways of brushing our teeth, of eating our dinner, of having conversations. And when your ritual is broken, you notice. Some rituals are personal or familial, like when my daughter used to say I love you, and then wait there expectantly for me to say, "I love you more." Some rituals are cultural, like county fairs and muskie openers.

Of all rituals, none are so significant as our religious rituals ... the regular ways we meet God together ... the familiar patterns that remind us Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow ... the symbols which point to a reality that can never be reduced to words. Many of these rituals have developed over the centuries and are highly stylized. The longer they're performed, the harder they are to change. There are still Catholics angry over the changes in the Mass that were introduced by the second Vatican Council back in the sixties, while most Catholics feel closer to God because of those changes. And Protestants argue constantly over "Traditional" and "Contemporary" styles of worship ... but they're all just human traditions. I like our style of worship ... both our contemporary and traditional services. I don't think we're right and others are wrong, but this is our way, and we have good reasons for it. We have found it a true and regular way to place ourselves in the presence of the living God.

But what would Jesus say about our rituals and traditions? Was he criticizing the traditions of the Pharisees per se ... or the way in which the Pharisees used those traditions to exclude people from the family of God? They were so dogmatic about it. It was their way, or the highway. Their religion was all about purity, and purity usually becomes a means for one group of people to think of themselves as better, more beloved of God ... and a way to exclude others from grace. Purity emphasizes the visible show of worship, but worship is not a show.

Appointing yourself the judge of other people's purity is like driving the wrong way down a one way street ... you put everybody in danger, especially yourself. Religion in general, and worship in particular, should connect people with the joy of a loving, merciful God and a caring spiritual family. Purity is not so much about keeping rules as doing good, as James says, "*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*" (James 1:27). In other words, including the forsaken ... caring for people ... is even more important than keeping up the show.

And, I think, Jesus complained to the Pharisees because they had come to the point of following the rituals without any connection of the heart ... as if going through the motions of keeping kosher and observing Sabbath were enough to connect them with God ... the way some people think they are close to God as long as they attend church religiously, even though it has no bearing on who they are and how they behave the rest of the time. That's why James says, "*Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*" (James 1:22). If your religious faith turns you into a hateful, angry, us-against-them, Pharisee, something is terribly wrong. If you come to worship to condemn other people for not being as good as you, you've missed the whole point. According to James, in a religious culture where the Word is very important, the

Word is not enough. Too many people are experts on the Bible, and use it to attack and wound and hate. They use God's name for their vain purposes. But we're supposed to let the scripture shape us into the image of Christ, who was all about loving people first of all. In a religious culture where words are very important, words are not enough. Behavior is what counts. Loving people is what counts.

It's not a matter of words *versus* actions ... heart *or* head ... intention *rather than* behavior ... but the connection of the two that counts. Whatever style of worship you follow, if it becomes an isolated act disconnected from your day to day life, it is empty and offensive to God. We shape our rituals, but then they begin to shape us. We come to this place and lay ourselves open before God to be transformed by words and thoughts, yes, but also by symbols which cannot be reduced to words. Here we are put in our place. Here we remember that we are beloved of God and therefore special in God's eyes (that's the part we like!), but we are also reminded that everybody else is also beloved of God and we should treat them so (which we don't always hear as good news). Here our natural narcissism is called into question. Here we transcend our lives, as God shows us again that we are not the center of the world, but God is, and we should get over ourselves. Healing, comfort, challenge, calling ... these are all the effects of worship upon us ... whatever style ... whatever ritual we use to open ourselves to the free and fierce winds of God's Spirit. But worship is not an escape from life. It is the means of life as we live out our worship from week to week between this gathering time. Worship shapes our being before God and leads us to be loving people like Christ ... against our natural human selfishness.

Religion in general, and worship in particular, is about living inside out. As God transforms what's inside us, our outside behavior begins to conform to the image of Christ, whom we embody. Hence the church is called "the body of Christ," because the Spirit of Christ dwells within us ... all the time.

Sometimes our hearts are not in it. The world has beaten up on us. Things aren't going right with our work... our relationships ... our plans. We don't feel like praising God. But don't confuse worship with feelings. You won't always feel excited or happy or even consoled by worship. But keep worshipping. In the recovery community they have a saying: "Fake it 'til you make it." But what they mean is not pretense, but behavior. Sometimes we feel like worshipping and so we worship. Sometimes we don't feel like worshipping, but we worship anyway, and then the feeling follows later. That's also why we need to worship with other people. When I am struggling to have faith, I can come here and others will believe for me. When I feel far away from God, I can come here and at least be close to people who are close to God. When I am feeling forgotten and alone, I can come here and be remembered and befriended.

The Greek word for worship is translated as "liturgy." It means, literally, "the work of the people." Well, clearly, it is work for the preachers and musicians and ushers, and we don't get to rest on the Sabbath. But it's not just work for me. It's your work, too, because worship is not a spectator sport. It is not entertainment. You don't just worship by getting up and getting dressed and getting your body to the service on time. Worship requires your active participation. It is listening for God to speak to you. It is singing God's praise, and saying your prayers. Worship takes courage. We don't like to deal with our stuff ... to let God into our inner being where it's

so messy and dark in spots and God may ask us to let go of things we don't want to let go of ... to forgive somebody we don't want to forgive ... to do something we don't want to do. That's why a lot of churches have plenty of empty pews ... and some are packed where worship is only ... and all about ... making you feel good and blessed and better than everybody else. But if we do our soul work in worship, we go forth from here no longer the same ... and ready to meet God in the sudden surprising places God plans to meet us in the week ahead. There is a right way and a wrong way to worship. Only, it isn't about style. It's about attitude - how you place yourself in relationship to God. It's about integrity - how you integrate your worship with your service. It's about focus - how you place God instead of yourself at the center. Worship is not what God does for us; it's what we do for God. Hence, it's the work of the people.

Only you know what God is telling you that you need to let go of today. Will you let go? Only you know those whom God is asking you to forgive. Will you forgive them? Only you know what God is calling you to do. Will you do it? We should come to worship God actively, joyfully, wholly, from the inside out. It's the work of the people ... the work to which God calls us ... your primary work. By the grace of God, let it be a labor of love.

May we pray?

Now, O living God, we stand before you, we open our hearts to you, we offer you our lives. Take us. Love us. Lead us. In every breath we take, in every word we say, in every move we make - may you be praised. Amen.