

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13
PSALM 45:1-2, 6-9
JAMES 1:17-27
MARK 7:1-8, 21-23
September 1, 2024

Pure Religion, Undefined?

Bad religion! In many ways we do not know how to define it or how to identify it, but as with many inappropriate, unfortunate, if not ugly things, we certainly know it when we see it. The sad reality is that bad religion, what the writer of the book of James would have called impure or defiled religion, is rampant today, toxic religious nonsense spewing from the mouths of so many who swear that their way is the highway, that they are right and righteous, and the rest of us have lost our way, that we are misinformed, flat out wrong, cannot find our way amidst the cacophony of variant voices crying for attention in the streets and on the airwaves. In the name of religion, we find a host of bad attitudes, much pontificating, inflexible social mores, guilt-driven judgment, incivility, and even death by vitriol and violence. Who in their right mind would sign up for that? Some have even gone as far as to suggest that the world would have been a better place had religion never been invented, never become a part of the fabric woven into the human psyche, enmeshed at every level of society. While we may disagree with that reactionary and uncritical assessment, being of the kinder and gentler variety, as we claim to be and hopefully are, we certainly get their point and respect their views. This idea does, however, come across as naively simplistic, naïve nonsense, a one-dimensional viewpoint lacking even a modicum of integrated thinking! As we continue to navigate our divided communities, divisions dominating our political, societal, and yes, religious landscapes, we look for ways to ameliorate or to at least manage our individual and collective fear and anxiety. We seek to find common ground, to establish and maintain civility, decorum, and somehow achieve even the remotest chance for peace in our time. As we read the Witness from the Epistles intermingled with the Witness from the Gospels this morning, the writer of James, and of course, Jesus, have some salient words, some appropriate and very helpful things to say as we try and somewhat meet the challenges that the living of these days, our days as people of faith, now present in real time, so many issues constantly emerging and evolving as we go.

The writer of the epistle that comprises the book of James, a book that Martin Luther once called “that right strawy epistle” because of its emphasis on works as a major contributor to, perhaps the only measure of, faith, suggests to first century readers to whom the letter was

originally written, that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Religion that is pure and undefiled, as if there was or is such a thing! Kind of like a unicorn, bigfoot, Nessie, the Loch Nes Monster, or a little closer to home, a Hodag! This strongly opinioned writer wrote these very interesting, intriguing and relevant words indeed, right after declaring, “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” Basically, this wordsmith gives us a whole lot to ponder, a lot to consider as we think about what it means to be religious, yes, to be spiritual, appropriately, positively, so, in a contemporary, postmodern, setting, in which many now proudly, piously, claim to be “spiritual” and not “religious”. Assuming for our purposes that the writer of James equated religiosity with spirituality, what does this loaded phrase have to say to us as we negotiate all the circumstances and situations that order and distract our lives? It is indeed a sobering question as we take this exciting and adventuresome journey of faith together.

But before we explore the admonitions proclaimed in the epistle of James further, we are going to take a detour because the lectionary editors have paired an interesting text from the Gospel of Mark with this sage wisdom offered by the ancient letter writer. You know the story well. The pharisees and some unnamed legal experts had gathered around Jesus to do the kinds of things they usually did when they gathered around Jesus, always butting in where they strangely did belong, always minding his business, looking for nitpicky things to discuss with the erstwhile rabbi as they criticized his every move. In their meticulous scrutiny, their myopic focus, with every tedious observation, they had noticed that Jesus’ disciples had committed an egregious faux pas, breaking what amounted to a Ms. Manners, Martha Stewart-on-steroids breach of etiquette, oh my, horror of horrors, the audacity of such an oversight. Jesus’ disciples had the nerve to fail to wash their hands before eating, an act that was both hygienically helpful and, more importantly, an act of ritual purification, eating in the ancient world, sharing a meal, always having religious connotations, always a scripted event with cultural undertones. I mean, who would eat food just to eat after all, just because you are hungry? The Markan writer was obviously annoyed, not at the disciples, but at those who mercilessly critiqued them as being common, uncouth in their dining habits. After all, it was customary, emphasis on custom, that traditional Jews, especially those in authority such as the Pharisees, went through the process of ritual cleansing, washing every implement, pots, pans, cups, jugs, what have you, a practice established by the elders once upon a time. These explicit and sometimes tedious machinations were also extended to bedding, their sleeping mats. Now, none of this, none of these things, are necessarily bad in their own right. I tend to clean my sheets every six months or so whether they need it or not! And as with you, I certainly want to eat off clean dishes! But when the average and ordinary, the routine, the common and every day, becomes an impediment to anything that would aid our daily lives, features and benefits as they say in the retail industry, assisting us in ways that make life better, necessary things such as eating and sleeping for example, just

to name two of the basics, then these petty things all combined, the sum of their parts, become stumbling blocks, to use a biblical image from the Gospels. All this negative residual literally becomes not only a nuisance but larger than life, simply adding monotonous layers that only serve to diminish and not enhance the living of our days. Some things are simply life sapping, not life giving! Yes, once again, Jesus advocated for rule breaking, for breaking rules, when he thought the rules and regs, the protocols, were just plain silly, totally unnecessary choreography, unhelpful ritualizing. A theological word we use is “efficacious”, a term meaning having salvific quality, i.e., salvation oriented. Well, there was nothing in Jesus’ thoughtful mind that was even remotely efficacious about going through the motions, taxing as so many of these extreme expectations were, of meeting a criterion, obligations, rites that he obviously deemed irrelevant and outdated, having an unofficial expiration date. In retrospect, however, perhaps that trivial pursuit began to die a quick or a slow and painful death right then and there on that very date on which he and his chose to ignore these procedures, drawing a line in the sand, skipping the nonsense altogether. As Jesus was prone to do, like any rabbi worth his pay grade, the reformer from Nazareth then quoted scripture, always an appropriate, helpful, thing to do, citing a text from the prophecy of Isaiah, a verse calling the Pharisees to account for their hyper disciplined, but oppressively smothering, requirements of inane value. **Jesus, after dismissing their pious concern, adds a final zinger for good measure, “You ignore the commandments of God while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you . . .” Ouch! So much for formalities! Let’s eat! Dinner is served! Bon Appétit!**

And those magical, mystical, lectionary editors have given us a nice segway as we return to the book of James, revealing an intuitive, thought-provoking writer who, like the Markan Gospel scribe, was also concerned about substantive stuff, that which really mattered, that which was of utmost importance, that which was urgent, that which was essential. And, as per usual, these ancient words continue to speak a relevant word to all of us as we seek to live our lives of faith, living religious, call it spiritual if you prefer, fulfilling lives that are pure and undefiled, the message that the writer of James sought to convey to his faithful constituents back in the day. Scholars assert that the book of James is unique in that it gives us a snapshot of Jewish Christendom, prior to schism, the big split that occurred between Jews and Christians, an inevitable happening that out of which was created a totally new religious movement that would come to be called Christianity, early followers of the way eventually called Christians. This nuance provides an important caveat of note because it tells us that the concern of the writer was about finding ways of merging the old with the new, of maintaining and building bridges, of honoring the tradition while embracing new interpretations, new understandings commensurate with a host of theological and Christological discoveries that of course seemed to have never appeared on the radar of the ancient Israelites. We know fully, however, that everything for which Jesus advocated during his three-year ministry in his preaching and teaching, his mission, was right there all along, staring at us the whole time in

the ancient text and prominently featured in traditional Judaism. The proclamations advocated by Jesus were nothing new under the sun, the tradition simply reinterpreted in a fresh way, allowing it to be heard and gladly, joyfully, received by his modern audience. The rabbi did exactly what we continue to do with the old, old, story now! Indeed, the message we just briefly explored in the Gospel of Mark takes on a new light, illumined by the figuring out, sorting out, that was taking place in the refinement of Jesus' message after his death and subsequent exit, against the backdrop, juxtaposed, to time-honored, and sometimes obsessively observed, traditions. In many ways, we continue to do that very same thing as we continue to interpret and reinterpret, not only the content of the Hebrew Bible describing the life and times of our Jewish forebears, but now by engaging the Christian scriptures with our Christian forebears. Think about it, what we have done and continue to do with the Bible, examining every jot and tittle, interpreting and reinterpreting in the best and the worst, good and bad, the most positive and the most negative of ways. The task is never complete. The job is never done. The assignment is never finished.

The writer of James must have been speaking to, admonishing what evidently was a lethargic collection of slackers and sluggards, a comfortable bunch, and thus a lazy church community that spent way too much time in contemplation and reflection, too much time praying, perhaps even worshipping, too much time being and not nearly enough time doing, yes, too much time on their hands! And it is here where the proverbial rubber meets the road, the crux of the matter now at hand! It is here where we read one of the more familiar and noteworthy verses of scripture, "You must be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves," a reminder that we are to be active, fervently so, in the church, in our communities, and in our world. For those who misinterpret what could be determined to be a misplaced emphasis by the apostle Paul on faith as a solitary criterion, using his words as an excuse to be non-participatory, a non-participant, in the ongoing ministry of Jesus, the book of James reminds us that idleness, that inertia, simply will not do, cannot be tolerated, will not be allowed, because we are called, all of us, all of us required to do something, and that something, plural, those somethings, are exactly, biblically, articulated with clarity, spelled out in detail. There can be no confusion, no equivocation, no exceptions, no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts! We cannot be faithful and be catatonic, motionless objects, and all at the same time! James likens inactivity to those who spend their time staring into a mirror as if pondering the fuzz in their navel, as if wistfully gazing at the moon or stars, in many ways a blind pursuit of the unimaginable, as one lost in space, without imagination, any creative spark of the divine at all, dormant as a doorpost.

It is interesting that the writer of James uses a mirror as a subtle metaphor, an image, pardon the pun, that is lost on most readers of the text. You see, in the ancient world, mirrors were very expensive. At the time the Christian scriptures were being written, mirrors

were a luxury item made of highly polished bronze, a very labor-intensive process.¹ “‘High end’ mirrors were fashioned from silver and often featured elaborate gilded decoration.”² This leads commentators Edgar V. McKnight and Christopher Church to assume that the writer was making a subtle jab at the rich who, while primping before a mirror, were sitting on their newly minted orthodox backsides while enjoying their life of leisure, basking in the afterglow of their salvation, embracing their newfound faith like it was a new hobby, a play toy or prize, something to ponder every now and then while failing to lift a hand, doing absolutely nothing, nothing to help their neighbors, those who were in need. The writer infers that these individuals were more concerned about their outward appearance, adjusting their hair and attending to other physical features, seeming to have no awareness, no intuitive sense whatsoever, that it was their inward parts, their hearts and minds, their spirits, their souls, that needed adjusting, at least a tweak, the proverbial facelift, an overhaul of the self. And who knows, some of these faithful who perhaps from birth had been blessed to possess a gilded silver spoon, may have stared into the mirror simply to enjoy what they were seeing! **“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” The fairest are certainly not those who avoid or ignore, who neglect, their neighbor, for they are as ugly as homemade sin! Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but real beauty is always found within!** And never forget that objects in the rearview mirror are always closer than they appear! But is that not the case whenever we turn aside to see ourselves, to look at ourselves up close and personal? Self-improvement always demands going more than skin deep, probing further into our being. I am reminded of the apostle Paul who warned us about mirrors, that they are dark glasses, or a glass darkly to use the King James version of that image, and never give us the full or perhaps at best a partial picture!

Religion that is pure and undefiled! Pure and undefiled religion! Good luck with that! Therein is the goal, the sacred objective, as challenging, as difficult and demanding as these words truly are. And it is a task that while easily understood is not always easily achieved, perhaps rarely so, though attaining this high calling is readily available when we make that divine commitment, that is, when we choose to meet needs, insuring the care and concern for our neighbors. After all, as we know full well, our neighbors are our brothers and sisters, here and everywhere, everyone specially referred to throughout the Bible as orphans and widows, a class of folks symbolizing the poor who, in turn, metaphorically represent all the down and out of society, all those who are lacking, the dispossessed, disenfranchised, the marginalized who live on the fringes, yes, the usual suspects described by Jesus, the folks who got his full, undivided, attention. Once again, the non-parable parable found in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew rears its beautiful head once again for our consideration. Feed those who are food insecure, quench the thirst of those who are thirsty, welcome

¹Edgar V. McKnight and Christopher Church, “Hebrews-James” in *Smyth & Helwys Commentary* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., Macon, GA: 2004), 345.

²Ibid.

those who are presumed to be strangers until there are none, clothe the naked, give aid and comfort to the sick, visit those who are imprisoned by whatever shackles confine and restrict them, yes, meeting the massive, seemingly unlimited, needs of the least of these, making sure that at the end of the day, in the final analysis, there are no distinctions among us, no sheep, no goats, just divinely crafted creations of God made in the divine image, all of us contributing to the common good, a selfless cause always greater than ourselves, the whole greater than the sum of our parts, creating a wonderfully gifted global village where everyone can become all that they were meant to be and where love is always the order of the day and every day.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls us to a religion that is pure and undefiled, calling forth from us care for the orphans and widows of the world, metaphorical speak symbolizing whoever they might be on this adventuresome journey of life. Amen and amen!