

True Religion vs. Toxic Religiosity
Sunday, August 28, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

I've always thought there should be extra credit for anyone who remembers a sermon after coffee hour. And that has never been more true than in this age of accelerated data dumps and social media tsunamis. The sheer volume of stuff shouting for our attention seems to exponentially increase from Sunday to Sunday ... and shows no sign of slowing down. We are arguably on information overload.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away a seminary professor compared preaching a sermon to standing in the pulpit and flinging a bucket of water into a room full of Coke bottles. "If you're lucky," he said, "some of the water will end up in some of the bottles."

I suspect his point was to lower both our anxiety and our expectations as fledgling preachers -- but I remember it because even at the time it felt to me like the bar should be higher. And I still do.

Nevertheless, the metaphor stuck with me -- and this morning I'm getting extra credit for remembering a sermon past coffee hour ... because I'm still carrying around some of the water flung from this pulpit last Sunday by Brother Chase.

I'm still mulling the powerful image of the moment when Jesus stopped preaching the sermon and BECAME the sermon -- the moment when he dared to heal the woman who came to him on the Sabbath -- defying the purity codes, rubrics, customs, and protocols that defined the religious tradition he inherited ... enraging the religious leaders of his day as he continued to make a name for himself as that Radical Rabbi from Nazareth.

And I'm still reflecting on this powerful question Chase asked from the pulpit:

“What will we be when life -- as life so often does -- dares us to be everything we say we believe?”

What will we be in response to a news cycle dominated by the rise of Christian Nationalism, by systematic faith-based scape-goating of transgender people in general and transgender youth in particular, by pearl clutching over student loan forgiveness and by the distortion of ancient biblical texts to justify eliminating the right to bodily autonomy for people who can become pregnant.

What will we be when judgment, condemnation, and exclusion are deployed as weapons of mass discrimination by those presuming to speak for Traditional Christian Values while utterly ignoring the justice, compassion, and inclusion preached by the Radical Rabbi they purport to follow.

“What will we be when life -- as life so often does -- dares us to be everything we say we believe?”

We'll get to the “what will we be” part ... but let's back up for a minute to the “where do we start?” part.

And as Episcopalians – as people of Common Prayer (if not always common belief) we start with this prayer appointed for today:

*Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
Graft in our hearts the love of your Name;
increase in us true religion;
nourish us with all goodness;
and bring forth in us the fruit of good works.*

Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; **increase in us true religion ...**

These words we just prayed in the “Collect of the Day” – the prayer which began our worship this morning as it does every Sunday with words intended to summarize the themes of the lessons appointed for this particular day.

Let me just start by saying that “True Religion” – (the thing we just prayed for God to increase in us) is, I am convinced, a whole lot easier to pray for than it is either to recognize or to agree on.

Here's my own “religion confession:”
I spent a number years
suffering from what I can only describe as a “religion allergy.”
That is maybe a weird admission from a priest,
but when I was a young adult
I spent a lot of time
explaining to people
that I didn't need religion in order to be spiritual.

I also spent a lot time avoiding attending the church I grew up in which was so full of rules and rituals, do's and don'ts, judgment, criticism and cranky old people talking about the love of God while being truly dreadful to each other that there seemed to be no actual room for GOD –

which I was naïve enough to think
was supposed to be the POINT of this whole thing in the first place!

It got to the point
where religion became a roadblock in my spiritual journey –
and so I took a detour.
And because God works in mysterious ways,
my “spiritual GPS” led me back to the Episcopal Church of my birth
and to All Saints Church!

And eventually I looked up the word “religion” in the dictionary
and here’s what I found:
it turns out to have the same root as the word “ligament” –
that which “binds together” –
and one of its definitions is
“that which binds together people in their quest for the divine.”

- Not “that which insists that our way is the only way.”
- Not “that which gives people license to villainize, exclude and even kill in God’s name.”
- Not “that which creates enough rules and restrictions that everybody you disagree with has to stay out.”

No – in the Gospel According to Merriam Webster, the definition of religion is:
“That which binds together people in their quest for the divine.”

And if that’s true religion then that’s something I’m willing to pray for.
To work for. To speak out for.

Because it turns out the allergy I had wasn’t to “religion” at all –
but to what it had become in the hands of those
who had taken what God intended as a means to draw all people TO God
and turned it into a system to hold everyone they found unacceptable
AWAY from God.

And it turns out the allergy I had was the same one Jesus had –
and acted on – throughout the gospels
whenever he was confronted by the rule makers,
gate keepers and power brokers of his generation.

People like those who complained that he was healing on the Sabbath –
who gossiped about his eating with tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts –
who complained that his disciples didn’t wash their hands the right way ...
and dozens of other examples all throughout the Bible.

“And what is the greatest commandment?”

(in other words “what IS “true religion?)

they will famously ask him later (trying to trap him)

And Jesus will tell them:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind – this is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it –love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang ALL the law and the prophets.

There you have it: the essence of true religion –
that which binds us together in our search for the divine –
turns out to be love:
love for God and for each other.

ANYTHING else that we manage to create –
even our most beloved rituals,
most comforting routines,
most cleverly designed systems –
can become **religious roadblocks** if they themselves
become more important to us than this walk in love,
this quest for the divine –
this journey to God.

True religion becomes toxic religiosity
when it makes what is **supposed** to bind us together in search of the divine
more important than the divine for which we search.

Toxic religiosity creates a narrow worldview
that programs you to believe science is an enemy of faith
and sets you up to reject as “fake news” the very science
that calls us to come together to save what we can of this planet
we have exploited rather than tended.

Toxic religiosity insists on male language for God
marginalizing women and non-binary people,
perpetuating the patriarchy
and fanning the fire of unexamined privilege.

Toxic religiosity lays down a roadmap where it a very short journey
from “the Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it”
to “my country, love it or leave it.”

And there is a direct connection between this theological worldview
and the rise of nationalism, sexism, white supremacy
and the rest of the litany of isms that plague our nation and our world:

the rise of the forces we struggle against daily
as we live out our baptismal promise to persevere in resisting evil.

And I'm convinced on this sultry summer Pasadena Sunday that toxic religiosity is high on the list of those things **daring us to be everything we say we believe.**

Daring us to live out in our time
the same countercultural values of true religion
the ancient biblical texts we inherit
were calling our spiritual ancestors to live out in theirs.

And how is it those texts call us to live out those beliefs as Jesus followers in the world?

From the Letter to the Hebrews we heard this morning:

- Continue to love each other as siblings.
- Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers
- Keep in mind those who are in prison
- Be mindful of those who are being treated badly
- Let marriage be honored by everyone

From the Psalm appointed for today:

- Good people are honest in all their dealings.
- Quick to be generous, they give to the poor, doing justice always and forever
- They are generous and lend money without interest

And can we just pause for a minute and give a shout out to that Psalm?

What are the odds this particular Psalm
would be appointed for this particular Sunday
in the week when forgiving debts
has suddenly become a bad idea to some
because it applies to folks staggering under the burden of student loans
instead of corporations lobbying for tax credits?

Psalm 112, verse 5. You might want to write that down. It might come in handy.

And as long as we're down the proof-text rabbit hole, here's another one:

Deuteronomy 15:1. *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.* Seriously. That's not from some liberal think tank. It's from The Bible.

You think maybe with football season starting, we might start seeing Deuteronomy 15:1 signs in the end zones?

Probably not.

Because as one of the meme-making pundits on Instagram put it:

“If there’s one thing student debt forgiveness has taught us about biblical literalists it is that they aren’t actually biblical literalists.”

This will not be breaking news to most of the All Saints Church faithful.

This is a community of faith that has literally spent decades challenging the kind of biblical literalism that takes passages out of context and twists them into weapons of mass discrimination – turning true religion values of justice, compassion, and inclusion into toxic religiosity values of judgement, condemnation, and exclusion.

It is part of the DNA of this community of faith we call All Saints Church and it is one of the building blocks we are called use as we to continue to build forward into God's future.

“What will we be when life -- as life so often does -- dares us to be everything we say we believe?”

I pray that the answer is that we will be "ligaments of love" that bind up the wounded, encircle the lonely, welcome the stranger, bridge the divide, and preach the Good news of God's inclusive love radically available to absolutely everyone.

A tall order in the face of all that challenges us on sultry summer Sunday in Pasadena? Of course it is.

Political activist and philosopher Angela Davis famously said:
“You have to act as if it were possible radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”

Nobody ever said it was going to be easy.
And yet that is the work we have been given to do.
It is why we gather around this table week after week, year after year, to be fed by the holy food and drink of new and unending life — reminding us that it is in the broken that we are made whole that until all of us are gathered in none of us are truly home and that another world is not only possible ... she is on her way.

End with Ana Hernandez.

Amen