

“Religion That Matters”  
August 29, 2021  
Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass uses the root meaning of the word “religion” as a way of redefining how we understand its purpose. The word itself comes from Latin *ligare* which means “to bind or connect.” Re-ligare, religion, means to reconnect. The purpose of religion is to bring us back into relationship, to reconnect us to God and to one another. That was the ancient understanding of its purpose.

But in more recent years scholars have sort of recast religion into a set of beliefs. So, religion is that body of claims we affirm or agree to about God, ourselves and the world. As Bass puts it, “In modern times religion became indistinguishable from systematizing ideas about God, religious institutions, and human beings; it categorized, organized, objectified, and divided people into exclusive worlds of right versus wrong, true versus false, ‘us’ versus ‘them.’” Religion, in other words, has become more of an academic pursuit whose practice consists of observing certain rituals, saying certain prayers, singing certain hymns, most of which can be done as easily in isolation as in community.

But is it really possible to be a Christian in isolation? Writers like James are convinced it is not. James’ letter to Christians in “the dispersion,” which probably means mostly Jewish Christians who live outside Judea in the wider Roman Empire, is concerned with how to put beliefs into practice within the community. For James it isn’t enough to agree to the claims of the faith, to hold the right beliefs; he wants to see a change in behavior.

We find a similar concern expressed in the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes in Mark’s gospel. In that case a particular practice, washing before eating for the sake of ritual purity, is being examined. The gospel makes an exaggerated claim when it says, “all the Jews” thoroughly wash their hands before eating. In fact, many would not have done that. Sadducees, for instance, would not have observed that practice. But the Pharisees did and they’re at the center of this encounter. And we should be clear: this has nothing to do with hygiene. It’s all about ritual purity. Essentially what the Pharisees did was extend the bathing requirements for entering the Temple into the home and everyday life, but not all Jews would have done that.

Jesus’ argument isn’t so much with hand washing, I think, as it was with the assumption that purity could be achieved by a ritual. For Jesus a person’s life revealed their purity. It’s how they interacted with one another, how they treated others who were weaker or in need, that made them pure or defiled. Outer cleansing doesn’t affect the inner life. Religion that focuses only on rituals and doctrines doesn’t transform the individual or society.

When James tells his people to be doers of the word and not merely hearers, he’s concerning himself with the same thing. If we spend our time pondering abstractions without actually taking action, then what’s the point? For James true transformation can only occur through action. And our actions are the evidence of our transformation. How we live with one another, how we hear one another all provide insight into the condition of our spirits. In our

current climate these words are especially meaningful: “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” I particularly like what he says about anger: “your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” It feels so often as if people use performative anger in the hopes of shouting others into submission.

It amazes me how modern James sounds. He’s speaking to a first century audience, but his words continue to have resonance today. We are still struggling with the same kinds of obstacles. We get so hung up on semantics or distracted by concepts that we never get around to taking serious action. We become, as one elder around here used to say, “so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.” And there’s a lot of earthly good that needs to be done.

I spoke this week with Andrea Cammerata at Journey’s End Refugee Services to find out if Afghani refugees would be coming our way soon. She said they are and when they do there’ll be a lot of help needed. The best way we can practice religion, reconnect ourselves with others and with God, will be to jump in and furnish an apartment or provide transportation or buy a fistful of Tops cards to help a family get settled. That’s the kind of religion James is talking about that’s “pure and undefiled before God.” It’s expressed through generosity and hospitality, concrete acts of caring that meet folks’ immediate needs.

In a couple of weeks some of us will be able to practice our religion by reconnecting with our community on Service Sunday. On September 19 some will be worshiping by working in the community at various sites as a way of showing that our faith calls us to action.

There are all sorts of ways we can be doers of the word and not just hearers. Practicing religion that matters, that makes a difference in the world is part of what it means to be disciples. Jesus calls his followers to transformation, to real change inwardly that can be expressed outwardly through acts of generosity, compassion and justice. The more we practice reconnecting, what James would call religion that is pure, the more we’ll find our own lives changing, our desires coming into alignment with God’s.

And isn’t that ultimately what we want from religion? We aren’t looking for rationalizations and general principles. We’re looking for change. We’re looking for real meaning. Reconnecting with the needs of the world will bring us into deeper relationship with God. That’s the “open secret” of our faith. We won’t find what we seek in abstractions or doctrines, in pious practices or self-righteous pronouncements. We’ll find what we seek in service to others, humbly emptying ourselves to be filled with the presence of God.

Amen