

## True Religion

Religion as it is defined is mankind's search for God. There are a lot of religions in the world, many of which make exclusive claims for themselves, but one thing they all have in common is the idea that there are things we created humans can do in order to gain God's favor—that if we try hard enough we can experience God, and if we're good enough we can experience God's pleasure long after we die.

Now, understanding religion this way, the Bible is NOT a very religious book. If religion is man's search for God, the Bible, ironically enough, tells of God's search for man! In the opening pages of the book of Genesis we hear of God's creative work in fashioning a Garden of Eden for humans created in God's image. And throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, we hear story after story of God's actions to bring His created beings back to him after they had lost their way. God raises up Moses, the great lawgiver, and then He calls and sends prophet after prophet after prophet to correct and guide. Finally he sends his Son Jesus who finally bridges the gap that resulted from our bad choices. Sounds a little familiar, yes?

There's a portion of our Episcopal Eucharistic Prayer, in fact, it's in all our Eucharistic Prayers, which recount a history of God's actions in reaching out to humankind. And during Holy Communion you're going to hear those words again this morning.

There's a fancy word for all of this remembering in the Eucharistic Prayers, it's called "The Anamnesis." You know the word "amnesia" which means to forget, right? Well "Anamnesis" is the act of NOT forgetting or simply "remembering." The portion of the Eucharistic Prayer where we recount God's history with humankind is the "Anamnesis," the portion when we remember what God has done to reach out to us, to take us back.

Today's Gospel reading of Jesus' parable of the Wicked Tenants is essentially an "anamnesis" of God's dealings with those He created in His image.

The reading tells of a man who planted a vineyard and he loved this vineyard and protected this vineyard, this vineyard

was his pride and joy. The vineyard was then entrusted to tenants and when the time came to collect the produce from the vineyard, the tenants rebelled and responded with violence toward the vineyard owner's representatives. Again and again the vineyard owner sent more of his people to the vineyard but the tenants mistreated all of them, even the vineyard owner's son.

Now, all of this story, this parable, up to now is all anamnesis. It is all a retelling using Galilean sharecropping images of how God has again and again reached out to us, His creation, only to have us, slap his hand away. We know what that's like, yes?

Well, Jesus, through this story, tells them that this rejection, the rejection of God's helping hand, the rejection of God's saving grace, the rejection of God's inspired word is going to have consequences. The consequences, get this, are just what we bring down upon ourselves. We are our own worst enemies and we cannot blame anyone but ourselves.

The story of the Bible; the very un-religious story of the Bible,

yes, the overarching theme of truth that runs throughout all of Holy Scripture is that God is always and everywhere reaching TO us, coming TO us, over and over again and WE . . . are always refusing his hand, refusing his help, refusing his salvation, all to our peril.

Our worst enemy is ourselves.

Whenever we hear about senseless tragedy happening in the world, we typically find ourselves in a sense of shock and disbelief. “How could this happen?” we ask. But time and time again, each and every time it happens, most recently in Las Vegas last week when that gunman opened fire on a crowd of concert-goers, we find ourselves shaking our heads asking, why.

And when we notice that the 4 worst mass murders in America (at Sandy Hook, at Virginia Tech, at Orlando and now Las Vegas) all happened in the last decade, it’s especially upsetting.

And it’s painful. It’s very painful because we then have to

deal with the fact that the world we live in and the society we participate in is a thing of our creation. The nation that we live in is a nation of our creation. It might not be exactly what you would create if it were up to you and you alone, but it IS a world that we humans, collectively, have created by our choices and our predilections for living freely.

Unfortunately, the price of admission for living freely is living where stuff like this happens and dealing with the consequences. Now, we know this intuitively, but still knowing this doesn't make it any easier.

That's what makes this is a dark time for us. And darkness breeds doubt. And doubt is a real bugger. But it is through darkness and doubt that comes the greatest creativity and the greatest manifestation of faith. And we know that our faith is strengthened every time we go through a period of questioning. But that doesn't make it any easier does it?

Our natural instinct, the thing that is already and always there for us would be to pull back from others, to move into a place of judgment ourselves. And when we go to this place of judgment and finger-pointing, we cut ourselves off and our

wounds continue to fester rather than heal.

In the darkness, it's hard to feel courageous. We resist love, we slap God's hand away which results in us resisting loving.

In the darkness, we usually look for someone to blame, to absolve ourselves from the problem.

Any time we hear of tragedies we kind of separate ourselves, both as a culture and as a Church, as evidenced by increased hostility and blame of the "other," that which we know is NOT us.

"Well its THOSE people that are making it this way" we hear said and we say ourselves.

Yes, the shame-and-blame game is all about projecting our inner state elsewhere.

That's why Jesus taught that, for the sake of *our* soul, we *must* love our enemy. The enemy—or whomever we

resent, dislike, or are annoyed by—carries our dark side.

“Why do you try to take the speck out of your brother’s or sister’s eye, when you cannot see the log in your own?”

Jesus said.

True religion, the kind of religion that actually helps us, embraces criticism, which is not blind negativity.

True religion embraces the healthy critique, which offers hope and vision, especially when we own our complicity in the problem.

We in the church who love something dearly have earned the right to make it better and keep it true to its deepest vision.

But first, we must recognize that God has something to teach us personally, not just the group or institution or those bad people over there.

The way through dark times is always much more difficult than the way around. Cheap religion gives us the way around, avoiding darkness.

True religion gives us the way through, stepping right into the mystery. True religion invites us to always be doing deep, personal, hard work that gets at the source.

True religion is counter-cultural. It IS radical; it cuts to the root (*radix* is Latin for root). It moves us beyond our "private I" and into full participation with reality.

Jesus taught us that the real source of our problems is OUR inner attitude OUR inner state of being.

This means we need to root out the problems at THAT level. The problem isn't "out there."  
The problem is inside.

The teachings of Moses said that you must not kill, but Jesus said that you must not even harbor hateful anger.

If we walk around with hatred all day, morally we're just as much a killer as the one who pulls out the gun.  
We can't go on living that way and not be destroyed.



Yet, for some reason, (historically) many Christians have thought they could think and feel hatred, negativity, and fear. Remember what happened in Europe in the 20's and 30's? All the evil and genocide of World War II was the final result of decades of negative and paranoid *thinking* among very good German Christians.

Jesus tells us to not harbor hateful anger or call people names in our hearts like "fool" or "worthless person" in the Sermon on the Mount.

If we who are enlightened are walking around all day thinking, "What an idiot he is" or "they are," we're living out of death, not life. If that's what we think and feel, that's what we will become--death energy instead of life force.

We the church cannot afford any disconnection from love. How we live in our hearts is our real truth—our real religion. The message of the gospel and of scripture is simple. God loves us and is constantly reaching out to us; and God won't ever stop doing this. We have the option of receiving this grace or of rejecting it.

Unfortunately, bad people will always be among us, even the ones we would never suspect as being “bad.” But THAT presence, the presence of evil, pales in comparison to the love which God has for us.

Evil shows up in spurts and dominates the headlines. Love, the kind of love God inspires, shows up all the time, over and over and over again, especially in the dark times.

So how do we survive?

Remember that darkness is sacred ground. The God who calls us into darkness will also sustain us and lead us through it. Paul said in Romans that “God . . . brings the dead to life and calls into being what does not yet exist.” The paradigm of Jesus proves it: resurrection is the one and only pattern.

Remember, it is the crucified and resurrected one who insists that we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

True religion releases those things that aren't working for us and allows God's hand in—it allows God's word in.

The Wicked Tenants in today's gospel refused this and embraced violence. Resistance turns the Rock which Christ IS into a stumbling block. Resistance makes us a victim of truth rather than a benefactor of it.

Let the grace of God's coming toward you heal your hearts and your minds.

Cling to that cornerstone and thrive.

Let the light that is in you shine, as God gives you grace.

To the only wise God our Savior be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.