

Religion

James 1:19-27

Acts 17: 16-28

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James 1:19-27

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

Acts 17: 16-28

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals, life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

Offerings for deities must be loaded with both hands on the right side of the body, so it is not possible to smell them.

You should pray five times a day. To carry out these prayers, some rules should be followed, such as washing the body, at the hour at which the prayers are performed.

The food consumed must be Kosher, that is, prepared according to religious standards.

Hymns are sung very slowly without instrumental accompaniment or harmony so that the emphasis is on what is said, not how it is being said.

Be doers and not merely hearers of the word.

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. We tend to know it when we see it, when we hear it, yet we cannot quite put defining words to it—we cannot, yet neither can scholars, although there are indeed many interpretations.

A few years ago I attended a worship service with some friends at their non-denominational evangelical church. The pews were chairs shaped into semi-circle rows. The choir was a praise band under a glass bubble. The hymnal was lyrics projected onto two large screens so that our hands were free to wave and sway through the air around us. The pew bibles were personal bibles each member brought from home. The preaching style was unfamiliar beyond seminary textbooks and frequent ‘Amens’ arose from the congregation. I was only in CT, yet I felt in a foreign land. I was in a foreign land, yet I felt at home as we worshipped God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit through the gospel, through prayer, through song, through fellowship, through a shared commitment to the active expressions of our faith, through an offering for the ministries of the church.

Religion-- it is something essentially impossible to define, it is something many of us were taught not to talk about in many situations, it underlies both greatness and evil in the world as it unites us and divides us, as it gives us answers just as it leaves us with many questions, and as people of faith it is essential to who we are and how we live our lives—both now and after.

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary offers what most of us would consider to be the definition of religion: ‘the service and worship of God or the supernatural and commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance’, but there are broader and scholarly definitions that challenge the concept of supernatural or deity and expand in a variety of ways on this description.

However defined, the concept of religion these days often has a bad rap as there is much evil that has been done in its name, so much exclusion of other people, and many wars fought. As the question goes, “did you ever hear of an atheist terrorist?” It is not religion that is bad. It is the perversion, the twisting, of religion that is bad, that adds to the pain and suffering religion is meant to cure and comfort.

As we think today, this Second Sunday in Lent, of what religion means to us and for us, we are acting in faith, in the teachings, trust and confidence of One greater than ourselves, and sharing in an established system of worship, prayer and praise to this One.

The word ‘religion’ comes from two Latin words “re” and “ligare” which means “to reconnect”. In this season of Lent we have the opportunity to deepen our faith and grow closer to God, to re-connect with the One who created, redeemed and loves us. Religion, reconnecting, leads us to deepen our spiritual nature and live out the highest qualities of love, mercy, forgiveness, kindness and generosity, just as it leads us to ethical and moral decisions, opens us

to optimism and hope, and offers a community of belonging in a fellowship of like-minded believers.

In this season of reconnecting with God, we are asked to affirm the courage of our faith convictions, to be deepened by what we believe and profess, and to take intentional ownership of our relationship with God rather than to watch from a passive distance. The late bishop of Brazil, Dom Helder Camara reflected in this way, “When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist.” Tending to those in need, to act on the lessons for care, feeding, welcoming, that Jesus taught balanced with the support of social and charitable structures is at the heart of our religious beliefs. Erik Klobell comments that, “Religion is the good Samaritan tending to the victim on the road, but it is also the squeaky-wheeled irritant demanding to know why the government has not made that road safer.”

The experiences of James and Paul, learned from Jesus’ ministry and teachings, show us again and again how religion is both the one tending to the one in need and being a part of the solution for all impacted by a situation that hurts, obstructs or oppresses. In the season of Lent we are more acutely attuned to how this matters to us personally, to the stake we each have in living out the Gospel into which we were baptized so that we may be doers rather than just hearers of the word.

Paul spoke to the people, the philosophers, of Athens who placed their faith in many gods. Paul speaks to us who can be distracted, can be pulled away, by the many gods of work, of anxiety, of overload, of activities, that have their place in our lives yet can take on more value, more priority than they deserve. He reminded them, and he reminds us, that God is our Creator, and we belong to God. It is in God that we live, work, rest, move and have our being. When and where we are in the timeline and boundaries of God’s unfolding story of creation is a gift from God who has given us different spiritual opportunities and religious invitations to search for God and perhaps grope for and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us, whether we follow our religious traditions from a pew, a chair, or our own homes in the midst of a pandemic. Amen.