

From The Pastor

What is the difference between true discipleship with Jesus, and the practice of Church religion? Does one maturely or effectively convey and relate to the other? These are questions that leaders in the church are asking themselves in an effort to stem the tide of falling church attendance and reluctant practice of traditional religious beliefs. Laity too are asking these questions as they search for a deeper meaning and significance of experience in their Sunday worship.

Today's readings are, in many ways, an entrance into these questions. An evident theme in the readings is that of discipleship and a true faith in God through Jesus, over and against the practice of religious rules and customs.

Perhaps a preceding question will help. How does God reveal himself? How do we perceive and experience the presence and action of God in our lives? The last two weeks I have reflected on beauty and joy. God is evident in the beauty of persons, creation, and life itself. Beauty has many faces and expressions. God is seen and made known in such ways for those who are disposed to God's presence. Joy is also evidence of the presence of God. We cannot create the mood or experience of joy by ourselves. Joy just comes; it is just felt and known. God is its source, and the one who gives it. For the one attentive to the presence of God this becomes obvious, and the experience of joy is universally associated with God.

Love is always a revelation of God. God is love, and those that live in love live in God and God in them. In this love, they find eternal life. Love is truth because it is an absolute necessity for the human person to know ourselves in God, and to mature in the dignity for which we were created. Jesus Christ is truth because he is the revelation and Incarnation of the love of God in a human person. This is not subjective to Christians, but a truth rooted in love itself. Christians accept this truth as the foundation of their faith. Others reject it. The truth remains because love remains.

The truth of love is often obscured or hindered when some elements of church religion manipulate the ways of God. This is the tension in the gospel that Jesus is working to correct. Jesus tries to make clear the reality of God against the creation of human ways.

How is it that the religious customs of the Pharisee's have over taken the presence and action of God? In itself, these religious customs had great value. The purpose of washing hands before meals was a means of purification out of reverence for God and a certain detachment from the world. It had a spiritual quality, a piety that reminded people to honor and reverence God. In our vulnerable human condition, and our need for control, God was forgotten for the sake of the practice. It became a rule to follow for its own sake, with due punishment attached for non-compliance. As a religious symbol, it lost its ability to convey the presence of God, and in fact, became a hindrance to God. Detached from God, religious symbols take on a life of their own, only to serve a human purpose.

Jesus is stern with this thinking, calling them hypocrites leading others in false religion. Jesus calls for prayer from the heart. Jesus makes it clear that what is important is that which comes from within a person. The question then becomes, what is in our hearts? Is it God we are seeking in the peace and truth of Jesus, or do we prefer the consolations of church religion to satisfy our spiritual needs? Does church scratch the itch of our spiritual need, or is it truly leading and inspiring us in the love of God through Christ.

It is much easier to follow church religion and stay on the surface of life, than to accept the deeper walk of a true relationship with God through Jesus. It is clear and obvious that God wants the later rather than the former. God is offering the joy and freedom, the peace and security of a relationship with himself well beyond the practice of church religion. God honors and uses the Church as a means of conveying his presence and power to believers. Still, the Church is a means to an end; it is not the end in itself.

What does Jesus want us to have in our hearts? Love is the answer. If love is in our hearts then we can find peace within ourselves. This is the first and most essential step. Are we confident and accepting of the love of God given us in Christ Jesus? Do we accept that God loves, heals, and desires us as we are? This is what it means to know God. If this is the case, then our good practice will follow. Our inside and our outside will match. If we are confident of the love of God within, then our words and actions will reflect that inner peace. If we are insecure about ourselves in God, not accepting love for ourselves, we will seek to find ways to fill the void. This is where spiritual practice can get off track. We begin to make God who we need and want him to be, rather than letting God be the God of love that he is.

Church religion is an essential expression of God in our midst. Faith and trust in the person and love of Christ is the foundation through which we find meaning and power in the spiritual life of the Church.

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