

In our Collect of the Day this morning, we pray that God will “increase in us true religion.” When I read that phrase in preparing this sermon, it brought to mind a kind of debate I often hear going on these days, a debate between “religion” and “spirituality.” I sometimes hear people say about themselves, “I’m spiritual, not religious.” One recent survey suggests as many as one in five people in America say that about themselves. And I’ve heard people say that in the most unexpected circumstances. One time I was on vacation in Northern Michigan, and I rode my bicycle on a scenic road that goes to the top of a very large hill from which you can look out over miles and miles of the Keweenaw Peninsula and Lake Superior. At the top of this hill, I met another party of cyclists who had come up from the other direction. I think they must have been law students, because up there at the top of this hill, surrounded by scenery that takes most people’s breaths away, they were deep in a discussion about the separation of church and state in our legal system. They were debating whether the state could compel a priest to testify about what had been heard in confession, or whether the church had immunity from that form of state power. And I overheard one of the young men making a particular point, and he started by saying, “Well, I’m spiritual, not religious; but if I *did* belong to a church, I think what would matter to me would be...” and he went on to offer his opinion. And I wondered why it was so important to him to tell his friends that he wasn’t religious, that he wasn’t actually a member of any church, and yet he had some pretty passionate opinions about church and politics. Why was it so important to him to be “spiritual,” but not “religious”?

Well, part of it seems to be that, for a lot of people, “religion” or “being religious” doesn’t seem like a particularly positive thing. It seems that, for a lot of people, the word “religion” means something like a certain system of beliefs, a certain series of statements, that you agree to treat as true even though you can’t make them all logically add up—in other words, “religion” means something that is inherently irrational. Or “religion” means an institutionalized hierarchy, where authority figures tell you what to think and how to feel and what to do, and no questions are allowed. Or “religion” is all about excluding people, and saying who’s *in* and who’s *out*, and saying who’s *good* and who’s *evil*—“religion” means hating people who don’t agree with your version of God’s word—“religion” is a motivation for violence and persecution and blowing up bombs in each other’s places of worship. To a lot of people today, that’s what “religion” seems to mean. That’s what it means when people like Christopher Hitchens write books with subtitles like “How Religion Poisons Everything.” And, sadly, there’s a lot in the world that seems to corroborate their point.

The word “spiritual,” on the other hand, to a lot of people is all about inner transformation. Being “spiritual” means awakening the soul and enlivening the self. Being “spiritual” means waking up to what’s really real. Being “spiritual” means finding enlightenment and discovering compassion and making inner peace.

And if that’s what those words really mean—if that’s what “religion” really is and that’s what “spirituality” really is—then, when people say it’s better to be spiritual than religious, I think I would tend to agree with them. I think the Gospel would tend to agree with them. And certainly, in today’s Gospel story, *Jesus* totally agrees with them. Because this confrontation between Jesus and some Pharisees over washing their hands before lunch can be seen as a classic example of what people today mean by the clash between “religion” and “spirituality.”

The Pharisees in the story are consummate religionists. They believe in the precepts of their tradition, and they believe their tradition covers every aspect of life: it tells them what to do, how to pray, what to eat, how to wash, how to do everything in order to be pleasing to God. Their tradition is backed up by an

authority structure of teachers and elders—and while the *interpretations* of teachers can be debated, the *authority* of the teachers can never be questioned. The Pharisees’ religious tradition tells them who’s in and who’s out, who belongs to the faithful people and who is excluded, who is on God’s side and who despises God and is their enemy. And according to everything their tradition tells them, the Pharisees look at Jesus and see him as a difficult, problematic, dangerous outsider.

And Jesus for his part wants nothing to do with this religion of the Pharisees. He says to them, “You have a fine way of abandoning God’s word in order to keep your tradition.” And he tells them that what matters is not how they wash their hands, but how they wash their hearts; what matters is not how they make the outward observance, but how they work the inward transformation of their souls. What matters is not how they do cleansing rituals for cups and pots and kettles, but how they allow their hearts to be cleansed of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly—how they allow God to fill their hearts with mercy, wisdom, faithfulness, compassion, generosity, welcoming, love. What matters, Jesus says, is how they are transformed from within to be more the people God really wants them to be. So in the story, if the Pharisees are squarely on the side of religion, Jesus comes down pretty decisively on the side of spirituality.

And that brings me back to the line from our Collect today. Because when we pray for *true* religion, I think we’re really praying for something that brings together both these common notions of religion and spirituality. Because the way Jesus teaches it, religion and spirituality have to go *together*: you can’t really have one without the other. Religion gives practice and form and community and flesh-and-bones to spirituality; while spirituality gives breath and life and warmth and compassion and personal experience to religion. When they’re properly understood, religion is the outward and visible sign that upholds and supports the inward growth of the spirit. Or, as I once heard someone put it, religion without spirituality is dead, but spirituality without religion is impotent. In the true religion that Jesus teaches, in the true religion that our Collect prays for, spirituality and religion go together to transform our souls *and* to transform the world.

That is the kind of religion *we* strive to practice here at Trinity as well. And that means that our religion, our Episcopal way of being Christian, is about *more* than how we use the Prayer Book, or how we stand or sit or kneel for worship, or who we elect as our bishops, or whether everyone at the table always agrees in every detail of every particular of every belief. Our religion is about *more* than who’s in or who’s out, who’s right or who’s wrong, who’s like us or who challenges us and enriches us with difference. Our religion is about *more* than the joke that Episcopalians believe in salvation by good taste. Our religion is about creating the conditions for the transformation of the heart. Our religion is about teaching practices for sharing each other’s joys and bearing each other’s sorrows. Our religion is about teaching practices for being honest enough to confess our sins, and trusting enough to rely on forgiveness. Our religion is about teaching practices for looking past the masks and roles and postures and positions so often put on us by society, and learning how to be ourselves, our true selves, and to rejoice with each other in becoming the wonderful children of God God means us to be. Our religion is about teaching practices for being fully alive. Our religion, in short, is about becoming spiritual; and our spirituality is given flesh and blood in our religious practice. We can’t really have one without the other—not if we’re to be truly religious and truly spiritual—and Jesus in our Gospel shows us the way to be both.

So today we pray that God will increase in us true religion. Let it be our joy to live out that prayer in mind and body and spirit. Let it be our mission to invite others—even “spiritual, not religious” others—to come discover here true religion and true spirit in true prayer. And may the grace of God empower us to bring forth the fruit of good works, to the glory of God and for the healing of the world. Amen.