

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond VA
Proper 17, Year C, September 1, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "True Religion"
Jeremiah 2:4-13, Psalm 8:1, 10-16, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14

God be in our heads, God be in our hearts, God be in our hands, God be in our souls [~ adapted from Madeleine L'Engle]

what a great honor and responsibility I feel to be starting a new ministry along with you; I am very thankful that your Vestry has called me to be your Interim Rector, and I look forward to getting to know all of you and to what we will work on together

I would normally use my first opportunity of preaching to a new congregation to offer an introduction to my approach to interim ministry; but with this being a holiday weekend, and just next Sunday being the return to the regular schedule of three services, I will wait until next week to do that overview; so think of today as a prequel Sunday; and what could serve as a better prequel topic for our time together than to reflect on the "true religion" which our Collect of the Day references?

what do these Bible readings have to say about "true religion?" Jeremiah warns us about being preoccupied with worthless things; the Psalmist raises a similar question, inviting us to ask if we follow our "own devices," or the ways of God; Hebrews speaks in the same vein and names "the love of money" and acquisition of material things as particular distractions from God; it suggests the mental tool of putting ourselves in other people's situations to help us make sure we care about people in need; it reminds us to minister to those who are homeless, or hungry, or needy, or excluded, as if we ourselves were homeless, or hungry, or needy, or excluded right along with them

Hebrews also reminds us of the importance of hospitality, of inviting and welcoming people into our homes and into our lives; and it is not a hospitality to those we already know and feel comfortable with; it is a hospitality to strangers, to those people we do not already know; Luke recounts Jesus' words on this very same matter; this passage really hit home with me when I

first encountered it in the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*; that version has Jesus put it this way: “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing”

all of these passages speak to the Bible’s conception of “true religion;” and notice that not a single one of these passages talks about church; they talk instead about our frames of mind and heart, and about the way we live out our faith in our daily lives; this is the kind of question every church has to deal with: what kind of an influence are we having, as a church, on our everyday lives, and on the lives of people outside of the church?

this question of “true religion” also brings to my mind the phrase many people use, saying that they are “spiritual, but not religious;” I usually hear these terms used to distinguish personal beliefs and practices from church beliefs and practices; there are many, and an increasing number, of people who see themselves as spiritual, but don’t feel that they need any church to be a part of their life; yet I wonder if they would use the same words, or be so dismissive of church, if we in the church were to model and witness these elements of “true religion” that we’ve been looking at?

“spiritual, but not religious” might carry some very positive connotations: a desire for personal growth and development, a seeking for a living connectedness to something larger than oneself, a longing for spiritual practices that can be integrated into daily life; it may be that through these kinds of positive characteristics that the (quote) ‘spiritual’ people may have something to teach us (quote) ‘religious’ people within the church

just as one’s life of faith may be limited if one is spiritual without being truly religious, so too one’s life of faith may be limited if one is religious without being truly spiritual; too much of an attachment to the liturgies, doctrines, and dogmas of our denomination, or limiting one’s life of faith solely to church-related activities may not fully satisfy one’s spiritual needs; it would be ideal if each of us found a balance between the truly spiritual and the truly religious aspects of Christian life; what might such a balance look like for you?

the ideal lifelong pilgrimage of faith for any person is a blend of deep spiritual longings expressed and experienced within the context of committed religious community; a lifelong Christian faith needs all of the personal, relevant, and practice-oriented actions of daily spiritual life, complemented by the communal, organized, and time-proven religious life; all that we do in our personal spiritual lives feeds and sustains our corporate religious lives—and vice versa; every time we come to church we bring with us the fruits of our individual and family spiritual lives, to share with others, and to offer to God in our common, shared, worship; and what we receive from the worship, the fellowship, and the faith formation offered by the church informs and deepens our spiritual practices in the weekdays that follow

through a focus on true religion, those of us within the church may actually have great points of connection with people outside of the church; how might we, together, better explore these points of connection with the VCU students, faculty, and staff who are right next door to us? how might you better explore these points of connection with your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, and yes, even strangers? how might we all, in Jesus' words, "be—and experience" new kinds of blessings, as we live out our true religion more fully, and reach out to those around us? I expect that all of these questions are something we will think, and talk, and pray about a lot over this year to come; as we do this, may God "increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works"