

## WHAT KIND OF RELIGION?

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

TEXT: James 1:27 “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to seek and to practice the distinctive faith God desires for the followers of Jesus Christ.

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Here’s something I’m sure you all knew without coming to church: There are entirely too many kinds of breakfast cereal. For heaven’s sake, there are four different versions of Cheerios. The cereals marketed to children dazzle and entice and incite arguments between the kid in the cart seat and the parent pushing the cart. Either we’ve seen a child grieving inconsolably because mom has refused to buy a cereal whose box displays the child’s favorite cartoon hero, or we have been that parent, either refusing or giving in. And that’s just the kid-oriented brands. There’s even more brands marketed to people looking for healthy options. Try making a granola decision.

But the message I have for you today, I’ll bet you have already guessed, is not about what kind of cereal we eat. Today’s message is about what kind of religion we choose. As with cereals, so with religions: there are far too many options. The *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* listed 217 official denominations in this country in 2006, not counting a dizzying number of independent, non-denominational congregations. We may be the only faith community in Newbury, but people in our neighborhood have lots of church choices without traveling too far.

So – what kind of religion do you want? How about a religion which requires clear rituals, both at church and at home, and promises that doing those rituals the right way will please God? The Pharisees in today’s story from the Gospel of Mark were offering that kind of religion. Don’t dismiss it too quickly – wouldn’t it be nice if all we needed to do to make God happy was to correctly wash ourselves and our dishware?

Let’s try another one: How about a religion which meets in an exceptionally convenient facility with the best parking reserved for visitors. There’s a Starbucks coffee bar in the lobby, and you can bring your coffee into the worship space. The band accompanying the worship is polished and not too loud. There’s lots of people of all ages in the congregation. And the message offers practical spiritual guidance for the actual problems you are facing. Don’t dismiss this one, either – I am describing a real church in New Hampshire which is growing rapidly.

How about a religion built on firm convictions and clear expectations? A church which doesn’t mess around with doubts and uncertainties; a church which stands for moral and theological clarity in a very mixed up world? One of the attributes of true religion as James understood it in his letter is its ability to keep its adherents unstained by the world. Wouldn’t that be a very good thing? Except for this: who decides what’s

right and what's wrong?

How about a church which comes to you by way of your television? It offers wonderfully inspiring worship, and it expects nothing from you. You can get religion without having to get along with people. There's a network of churches in New Hampshire which were already televising their lead pastor's sermon to ten worship spaces before the pandemic had us all presenting worship online.

You know I could go on. It is statistically true that overall religious practice in this country is declining. Even so, the variety of flavors of religious practice appears to be increasing. Even inside the old mainline denominations like our United Church of Christ, there are as wide a variety of flavors of church as there are brands of cereal.

So what kind of religion do we want, we the people who are gathered here this morning? For many people who have been part of the South Newbury Union Church for a long time, the answer is easy: *this kind*. We want the kind of religion that we're used to. For some of us who fondly recall a day when congregants were more involved, when church was more the center of our community life, and did not have to compete with so many other activities, the answer would be: *that kind*, the way it used to be.

Beyond considering what kind of religion we might want, it is worth considering what kind of religion *God* wants. Of course, all the religious versions believe that their version is exactly what God wants. Some versions, in particular, the United Church of Christ, the denomination to which the South Newbury Church belongs, believe that God likes a wide variety of human religious practice. But how do we know what kind of religious practice truly glorifies God? Today's scripture passages offer some clear guidance. Jesus responded to the Pharisee's criticism that his followers did not observe the traditions of the elders by charging them, using a verse from the prophet Isaiah which decried honoring God with our lips but not our hearts, with confusing human traditions with God's expectations. The issue that riled the Pharisees was that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. Now, I don't suppose we should come out against good handwashing, especially now, when it is one of the very best ways to avoid spreading the virus. The cleanliness practices of the Pharisees make as much sense now as they did then. The problem was not with the practice; the problem was confusing a good idea with a commandment from on high. The problem was thinking that purity before God required a ritual, rather than purity of heart, a cleansing of our inward drives and desires. If we examined our practices, I suspect we'd discover some traditions which we've come to believe must have been dictated by God. Worshiping in a building easily recognized as a church, for instance. Insisting that we

sing hymns familiar to the people who've been here the longest. There's nothing wrong with practices like these, unless they come to be regarded as the only religious practice God wants.

The Letter from James pushes this idea to the next level. We are beginning a reading of this letter in our worship which will continue through the month of September. James was very interested forming right belief and right behavior. Apparently the churches for which he was responsible were getting confused. They were making distinctions among believers based on wealth. There were some people with divisive attitudes in those churches. There were people who could talk the talk but didn't walk the walk. James had some sharp rebukes for people doing those sorts of things. Keep coming back all month; you'll get a full dose of James' straight talk.

Today's passage rejects a worthless version of religion and lifts up a practice that pleases God. Listen to how James' thoughts are rendered in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible called *the Message*:

"Anyone who sets himself up as 'religious' by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world."

Wow. James' understanding of real religion doesn't require going to church. It doesn't involve praying. It doesn't need special rituals. Just this: care for people in need, and avoid the world's corruptive influences. James reminds me of Micah, an Old Testament prophet who was outraged that God's people thought practicing religious rituals was all God wanted of them. "God has told you," Micah declared, "what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Now, don't go home from this worship today thinking that the preacher said we don't have to come to worship or pray or wash our hands in order to be proper followers of Christ. But do leave here with this in mind: God is not particularly interested in what kind of religion we want. The point of true religion is to move us out of self-absorption and into God-absorption. The point of true religion is to join God in God's great work of mending this broken creation which God continues to love. Yes, do justice and love mercy. Yes, seek the welfare of the widow and the orphan, the homeless and the loveless. Yes, cultivate a humble walking with God, not insisting on our way, but constantly seeking God's way.

And here's something crucial to keep in mind: we can't be like this all by

ourselves. On our own, without the wisdom and guidance of others, we are so easily tossed about, so easily led astray. We need a community of faith to encourage us, to confront us, to inform us, to ground our practices in a faith-shaped tradition that reaches back to the prophets and apostles. God knows that. Jesus knows that. That's why we have a church.

James wrote this, perhaps one of the most important sentences in his whole letter: "In fulfillment of God's own purpose he gave us birth by his word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." (James 1:18) The Church of Jesus Christ, in the way we are with each other, and in the commitments God expects us to have to the last and the least, presents to the world God's vision of what God wants for the whole world. That's a tall order. No wonder churches divert their energy into perfecting rituals and building better buildings and figuring out how to survive as an institution. As challenging as those things are, they are a piece of cake compared to being God's first fruits of a new world order.

But this is not up to us. As the church, we are not our own creation. It is God who gave us birth, with the word of truth serving as the midwife. I take this to mean that the religion God wants is coded into our spiritual DNA. Our job is simply to be what God made us to be, so that we can fulfill the purpose for which God brought us to life.

My father was a very handy man. I have fond memories of going into our home's basement with him, where he kept a workbench with a fascinating collection of tools. He set me up with a small workbench of my own, and I used it to figure out how to make things. Dad was a stickler for using the right tool for the job. The right size hammer, the right size screwdriver, the right kind of pliers. Use the right tool, and the chances that things will go well is markedly improved.

Think of the Church of Jesus Christ as the right tool in the right hands for the job that needs to be done. God made us for a purpose. We are specially designed for a bold undertaking, which is to participate in the healing of creation, the establishing of God's realm on earth as it is in heaven. This particular church, just like any particular church which is authentically seeking to practice the religion God wants, is a tool God has made and God is using for a specific task in God's grand plan. Rather than trying to figure out what kind of religion we want, all we need to do is to be what God made us to be, which is to be a tool in God's most capable hands. Rituals, traditions, facilities, convictions— things like these are not what finally matter. What finally matters is the job God wants to get done. Thank God that God is using us to accomplish God's purposes. That's the kind of religion we were made to practice.