

Saint Paul and Saint Luke
Sermon: 15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2024

The Reverend Martha Harris

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 609
Psalm 15
James 1: 17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

What is True Religion?

Today's readings bring into sharp focus the true identity of our religion - the focus of our divine devotion. Are we drawn to worship God out of guilt? Do we experience shame if we don't attend church regularly - or joy, through the blessed act of praising and worshiping God - the source of all truth and life.

What does God expect of us? That we are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for anger does not produce God's righteousness.

James' epistle serves as an appropriate reminder as we approach Election Season. Christianity has become a rallying cry for some - with Jesus wrapped in the US flag. That is not what Jesus intends. As explained in the gospel passage, Jesus was often accused of breaking with Jewish custom. In Mark's Gospel we learn of the tension and accusation by the Pharisees that Jesus' apostles weren't washing their hands before eating.

Jesus knew that nowhere in the Old Testament is a commandment to wash your hands before eating food. We were taught that by our parents - and reminded of the necessity to wash our hands and food purchased at market - during the pandemic in order to stop the spread of infection.

Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being false witnesses - hypocrites who honor God with their lips, but not in their hearts who “teach human precepts as doctrines.”

As a country, we are caught in a debate between what is right and what is wrong. What does God ask of us? To love one another as He loves us. To love God as he loves us, and love our neighbors AND our enemies.

Do we accept people from other cultures, with different ethnic backgrounds and customs, as people of God? Or do we worship a god who only blesses white people?

I learned a term when I attended a lecture by Dr. Lee Barrett at Lancaster Theology Seminary on Friday afternoon. He was asked to describe the evolution in theological thinking over the past 200 years when the seminary was first established in the German Reformed Movement at Dickinson College in 1825. His sweeping address hinged on two words: Dialectical Tension.

What did he mean by that phrase? Example are in all three of our readings this morning:

Deuteronomy: You must observe God’s commandments diligently - not adding anything to God’s commandments.

James: If you are hearers of the word, but not doers, we deceive ourselves. Religion must be pure and undefiled before God, the Father - as demonstrated by caring for orphans and widows in their distress.

Mark: You abandon the Commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

All the ways we defile God and ourselves come from within the human spirit;

As today marks the beginning of our month long focus on Creation Care, which encourages us to be better stewards of God's creation, I would like to add to Mark's sordid list of sinful behavior:

- 1) Pollution of our air and water
- 2) Drought that leads to famine, starvation and migration
- 3) Abuse against one another - violent and behavioral
- 4) Violence and murder
- 5) Inequality in Justice, Employment, and Gender recognition.

The motivation for all of these behaviors is a singular focus on SELF over OTHERS. Short term over long term,

God gives us the ability to do GOOD - and to do HARM.

We need to manage the tension within ourselves to enable us to be slow to anger, slow to speak and quick to listen and learn. When faced with a difficult challenge, we can pray to God and meditate. Many times when I've been faced with a conflict or a difficult situation, I pause and pray - and wait until an answer comes from God as to how I should proceed.

There was a popular expression a few years ago - WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? Jesus was humble and kind, generous and loving. He practiced DIVINE COMPASSION - love for all creatures, big and small.

We will be building on these themes throughout the month. Our problems may seem overwhelming, but with God's help - our own purity of intention - we can accomplish much when we work together and keep God in the center of our lives and daily actions..

Close with Prayer for Labor Day

Let us pray,

Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives. So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.