

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 17-Year C-The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 8.28.22

My mother's family was large and most of them lived within driving distance of one another. Holidays were important in my family and they always centered around dinners. Cooking would be done for days ahead and there would be abundance. One Thanksgiving there were 5 kinds of stuffing because each was a "favorite" of someone in the family.

One of the things I remember was the divide between the adult table and the children's table. We had the same food and we were in the same room, but the children all looked forward to the day when we would graduate to the adult table. It was a matter of having our status recognized. Where one sits at table was important in Palestine and it is still important today. White House experts in etiquette spend hours planning who will sit where for State dinners, it is never random.

A Pharisee in the Jewish world of Jesus was important religious leader of the day. On finding himself at the home of such a leader, Jesus took the opportunity to observe what was happening around him and to use what he saw to make a point. He told a story, a parable in which everyone could see themselves. All gathered at the home of the Pharisee that day were given not only food for the body but food for thought.

Often, I have heard people say that they are "spiritual but not religious". They most often say it proudly as if they have risen above mere religion on to a higher plane, a spiritual level closer to heaven, to God or to whatever they revere as holy. I am never sure exactly what that means. How have the two, spiritual and religious, come to be split apart, to be separated? When did this happen? Is one more lofty than the other? And perhaps most importantly how do you see yourself, spiritual, religious, both? In his own way, this is what Jesus was addressing in his comments about dining protocol and guest seating.

Jesus himself was both spiritual and religious. He often went apart to a private and quiet place, to pray. It was the way he re-energized after teaching, healing, confronting conflict. It was time when he could be linked in a personal way with God. It was the way in which Jesus, the incarnate human being was connected with the Holy Spirit. For Christians, that is what it means to be spiritual, to be connected, indwelt with and led by the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus was also religious. We often find him in the synagogue, participating in the worship. He was a rabbi, one who teaches and preaches. Jesus kept the commandments and kept holy the sabbath day, even if he did so in his own particular way. He was religious without being bound up by the rules of religion. Jesus lived out the ideal that the sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings being made for the sabbath. Rules are made to provide a context within which we can draw closer to God and to one another. Religious rules should not exist simply for their own sake. Jesus was religious but not rule bound. It was this insistence that the religious rules were a way of aiding human relationship with God that so often brought Jesus into conflict with the leaders of the synagogue.

Being spiritual and being religious were knit together and inseparable in Jesus. They are meant to be united and inseparable in us as well. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his followers that they are to be perfect even as God is perfect. It sounds like an impossible task for human beings, for only God is perfect. Impossible until we realize that what we think of as perfect, without flaw or blemish, without error or mistake, is not what Jesus is talking about

here. To be perfect as God is perfect, here means to be whole. That in itself is a huge and lifelong work. Part of becoming perfect is to be both religious and spiritual in a balanced way. One does not attain its full potential without the other. To be either wholly spiritual or wholly religious is to be lacking in depth. To be only spiritual or only religious is to be only half alive. What does it mean to be spiritual? It is highly personal and so will be different for each one of us. We are created, wonderfully and beautifully made in the image of God. But the possibilities of that image, like God, are infinite and changing. To be spiritual is to accept the way in which we are in the image of God and to continue to grow into that image and likeness.

Some years ago there was a phrase popular, One Way. There was often associated with the saying an arrow, the point of which was also aimed skyward. The picture was half right. There is a way, a path, an arrow pointing toward God. But the other end of that arrow also has a point which points toward each human being. To be spiritual is to be engaged in communication between God and one self. Highly individual, expressed in an infinite number of ways, constantly changing, but always between the individual and God.

What does it mean to be religious? God, expressed as the Trinity, is not one but three. Trinity is the supreme example of community. There are three, acting together to create, redeem, sanctify. To be religious is to be in community with others. To be religious is to have a canvas on which the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of ones own spiritual communication with God can be seen. We cannot do this alone. Even the solitary monks in the desert were in community, concerned with the world in prayer if not in physical presence. We are created as communal beings. If I am not engaged in a community of faith, I am missing half of the equation. One plus zero always equals only one, but one plus one can grow beyond itself. One plus one equals two two plus two equal four and so on, community.

Spirituality and religion became separated in the minds and hearts of some human beings when the "what" and "how" of our life together in community became more important than the "why" of that life. The separation occurred when the ritual and symbol of the communal expression of faith became more the focus than the meaning behind the ritual and symbol. It happened and continues to happen when we disconnect what we do from the reason we do it. It is then that religion ceases to be real and becomes empty.

There is a marvelous children's story, the Velveteen Rabbit. You may know it. Like so many children's stories there much for us to remember as adults. Two of the nursery toys, a rabbit and a skin horse are in conversation. The rabbit asks what is real? The wise skin horse replies that real isn't how you are made, it is a thing that happens to you. When a child love you for a long, long time, no matter what, then through that love the toy becomes real.

Reading between the lines of this story, I would say to you that what is real is found in being whole, being both religious and spiritual in our own unique ways. It isn't what symbols have meaning or which posture we use for prayer that makes us whole and real. It isn't about how we define our spirituality. Being real, being whole is founded on that on which God has founded the world. Being real and being whole is founded on love, the love God has for us and the love we have for one another. In this way the prayer of our today's collect will be answered. "Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.