

In our opening Collect of the Day, the prayer intended to collect the themes found in our lectionary readings within our church calendar, we prayed “increase in us true religion” and that petition has stuck with me all week.

What is true religion? Is it right belief? Is it correction action? Is it ultimate truth, ethical living, or some combination of it all?

Webster’s Dictionary defines religion as “an organized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.” Its synonyms are faith, belief, creed, and conviction. I think “true” religion has some nuances worth exploring.

While we may look to the Church for an answer, we can’t be blind to the fact that the Church often gets it wrong in the name of defining “true” religion. Religious persecutions throughout history, the crusades, burning those of “other” beliefs at the stake, Protestants and Catholics alike, conflict in Northern Ireland, war in the Holy Land and the Middle East, fundamentalism which is more often about who is out than God’s love for all, all make their claim to being “true” religion.

Peter, who just last week, rightly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the claim upon which the Church is build, gets it so very wrong in today’s gospel. Here we have the first of three of Jesus’ foretelling as to what the future holds for him, for the Messiah, and Peter denies the possibility of Jesus’ death and resurrection out of complete misunderstanding of who and what the Messiah is and ultimately God’s will. “Get behind me Satan,” is not just some angry response but Jesus’ rebuke because Peter is actually opposing God’s will.

I wonder if “true” religion, then, must be aligned with the will of God. And how often, in the name of “true religion” has the Church, have we, opposed the will of God in our lives?

The prophet Jeremiah was faithful to God’s will even when it caused him rejection and great pain. He lived and prophesied at the time when Israel had been exiled to Babylon enslaved and subjected to their imperial rule. Persecuted for his prophecy, he begs God’s retribution. His words are a lament and familiar to any of us who have suffered any hurt in this lifetime.

Rather than enact vengeance God affirms the people of Israel as precious to God and, through Jeremiah, entreats them to turn back to God in an announcement of salvation. History will see God’s hand in their release from captivity and return to their homeland to rebuild life for themselves, under God’s rule, which is and has always been, God’s will for them; until they once more go astray. How often did the Israelites oppose God’s will in their lives? How often do we turn to a different religion: power, prestige, self-actualization, forgetting that, in the words of Bishop Michael Curry, “if its not about love, it’s not about God,” what I would argue is a very real description of what makes religion “true.”

While our Old Testament reading begins with words of lament, it ends, as our psalm reflects, with the hope of salvation. God’s act of redemption, whether it be the freeing of the Babylonian captives or the raising of Jesus from the dead, is a mark of God’s grace and unconditional love, and the basis of “true” religion.

And if we continue looking for a descriptor of true religion, it doesn't get any better than today's passage from Paul's letter to the Roman which follows the entreaty to "present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, to choose to be transformed, to discern or test what is the will of God, and to exercise the gifts given for the ministry of Jesus Christ." Followers of Jesus Christ are called to "let love be genuine; hate (or reject) what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." And, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink," making "true religion" as much about right action as belief.

Peter is a stumbling block to the will of God because in Jesus' words, he is "setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." True religion is from God. It is living God's will in every aspect of our lives. And so, in our collect of the day, we also pray, "nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works" like those that St. Paul describes, like those vows we make in baptism, like Bishop Curry reminds us, "if it's not about love, it's not about God."

How often have we, as a community of believers, as the Church, in the name of religion missed the mark? Jesus, God incarnate, did not live among us to start an institution, but rather to rebel against broken institutions, powers and principalities, that failed in God's mandate, God's will, to love and care for the people in their charge; institutions which failed to take up the cross of generosity, kindness, and love, because blinded by self-interest, they failed to love one's neighbor as oneself.

True religion is as much about righteous living as it is about knowing and proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. This is the will of God for us all. This is our salvation.

I've heard it said that salvation is free, but will cost you everything. True religion comes at a cost because, as I have noted, it is often understood by the world, and the Church, as something very different.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This is the true cost of discipleship – that in choosing the will of God we will probably need to turn our backs on the ways of the world.

Religion is so much more than an institution. It is a way of living, a way of being, and it is only "true" when it is in concert with Christ. "What would Jesus do?" is probably one of the hardest questions we can ask ourselves. Its answer will always be grounded in love, kindness, justice, inclusion, and hope, which is God's will for us all. And that is what will mark it as true.