

22nd Sunday 2018

Today's readings invite us to ask a very important question. What does it mean to be religious?

In our first reading from the Old Testament, the answer is clear. To be religious was to be obedient to the statutes and decrees that had been handed down by God. For the people of Israel, the Law was paramount and it was seen as a sign of God's love and protection. The Jewish people considered themselves blessed and favored by God. What other nation on earth has gods as close as our God, whenever we call upon him? None. What other nation on earth has laws as just as ours? None. They considered the Law of God to be a gift and something to be followed closely. The Law was seen as life giving. For them, a religious person was one who was faithful to God's laws and abided by them in his or her daily life.

In the gospel, Jesus moves beyond mere observance of the Law. Jesus, who told his disciples that he had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it, called his followers to go beyond mere observance of statutes and decrees. He challenged them to cleanse their hearts, minds, and souls. He told them that to be religious was to be holy. He exhorted them to remove all evil and sin from their lives and to purify their thoughts, attitudes, and actions. In today's gospel he condemned the scribes and the Pharisees for their empty religious practices like cleansing and purifying cups and vessels, while refusing to cleanse and purify their hearts, minds, and souls.

St. James, a follower of Jesus and an apostle who emphasized the importance of good works, described pure religion as caring for those who were in need. He stated that a truly religious person is one who not only hears the Word of God but is a doer of God's Word. A truly religious person is one who cares for the widow and the orphan and who avoids the temptations of the world — greed, selfishness, sexual immorality, and lust for power.

If we put these three understandings of religion together, we have a pretty good description of religion at its very best. Religion requires abiding by the Laws and teachings of God as revealed in sacred scripture, especially in the words of Jesus. It also requires a desire to be cleansed of sin and to be on a journey of ongoing conversion, rooting out of our lives everything that is evil and sinful. And, religion is expressed most perfectly by the way that we love and care for each other and, especially for the least of our brothers and sisters.

It seems that in our day religion is often viewed as something negative and even to be avoided. We hear many people say that they are spiritual but not religious as if the two are contradictory. Statistics reveal that the fastest growing religion are those who claim not to have a religion. They are called the "nones."

Is it possible to be spiritual but not religious? Of course. We are spiritual beings living human lives. We have an innate desire for connection with God and our inner spirits or souls long to be in union with God who is Spirit and Life. Many people who do not belong to a church are spiritual and find comfort in their personal relationship with God.

Is it possible to be religious and not spiritual? It is. Just look at the Pharisees and scribes in today's gospel. They were very religious but Jesus condemned them for being very far away from God. Why? Because their religious practices and their piety were external. They believed that by performing these acts of worship they were pleasing God. Jesus told them that what God really desires is a clean heart. A heart that is full of love and compassion. A heart that reaches out to those in need. God desires faithfulness to his Word which means cleansing ourselves from sin, living humbly as true sons and daughters of God, and pursuing justice and peace.

The very fact that we are here in Church today indicates that we are religious. We have come together to worship God through religious rituals and practices. We profess belief in certain teachings and dogmas. We also come to express repentance for our sins and we seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

These are meant to assist us in growing spiritually. In my opinion, being a spiritual person — that is a person connected to God - is more easily attained within a community of faith. Within a community of faith we have the necessary supports to grow in our knowledge of God, to experience his presence, and to grow in our relationship with him. We have a community of believers to help us, to walk with us, and to give us encouragement and good example. Through ritual and symbol we can experience the presence of God in a tangible and visible way. We also have a set of teachings and laws that guide us in our moral life.

There are so many good reasons to connect ourselves to a solid religious tradition. As Catholics we believe that our Church is the Church Jesus himself instituted. We bind ourselves to him by binding ourselves to his Church. Through the sacraments of initiation - Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist - we become members of his body, the body of Christ.

The word religion comes from a Latin word which means to re-connect or to re-bind. Through our religious life we bind ourselves to God and to one another. When we practice our religion we reconnect with the God who loves us, redeems us, and makes us holy.

We should be proud to be religious for our religious life is what assists us to be truly spiritual and to be true sons and daughters of God.