



Pentecost 15 – Proper 17 (B)

True Religion

[RCL] Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

“Increase in us true religion,” our collect invites us to pray. It’s a helpful qualifier. Plenty of us have religion. Each one of us has something or things that we devote our lives to, that we spend money on, that we dream about, that we worship. What is our life oriented toward? Who is it oriented toward? And is it true religion? And how would we even know...

The Epistle of James gives us a pretty big hint: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

The first two pieces of this are clear, even if it’s not always obvious how exactly to go about caring for orphans and widows. But we know that we need to; the body of Christ must respond to the needs of its most vulnerable members. True religion might involve adoption, setting up grief groups, bringing meals to the bereaved, putting a roof over someone’s head in times of need. This is where we begin, this is how we know if our religion is on the right track or not: Are we taking care of our most vulnerable members?

But the third instruction from James, to keep oneself unstained by the world, is a little less clear. What threatens to stain us? How do we keep pure in the eyes of God? Is such purity even possible in our 21st-century world, given that we’re all wrapped up in globalized markets, cross-national supply chains, the military-industrial complex, big agriculture, etc. Aren’t we all sort of tainted, wrapped up in systems far bigger than ourselves?

Jesus himself will weigh into the purity debate of his own time. How does one keep oneself undefiled, unstained by the world? There were some disagreements among the Jews in his day – some were following certain traditions of washing hands, others were not. There’s a question that people kept lobbing around: What defiles someone? What stains them? The things that go in them or what comes out of them?

Now, Jesus didn’t live in a time with insidious pollutants, food tainted with carcinogens, GMOs, etc. So, let’s get clear about one thing before moving on: God created our world and called it good. God then became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, taking on our flesh, redeeming and reminding us that we are holy, beautiful,

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and beloved. Thus, Jesus wants us to care for our bodies and the created world. Those things that make orphans and widows are not things that are typically of God. The things that destroy the children of God and the creation of God make our Lord weep.

But pre-mass pollution and carcinogen-laced living, Jesus takes a clear stand: It's what comes out of us that defiles us. In other words, it's a condition related to the human heart.

If you have a heart, if it's beating in your chest, then Jesus is speaking to you.

It's too easy and far too convenient to point at everyone else and say, "That's where evil comes from." It's so tempting to parrot and create smoke screens, slowly convincing ourselves that *those* people are to blame. We're very good at scapegoating someone else or other groups of people. We'd rather Jesus' words weren't directed at us, we'd rather turn our gaze somewhere else, anywhere else besides inward, looking deep within, sitting for a moment with our own hearts.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a novelist and chronicler of brutal prison camps in the former Soviet Union, boldly said of humanity: "The line between good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either - but right through every human heart."

That line runs through your heart. It runs through mine.

From our hearts, the epicenter of rationality and will in Jewish tradition, flow all sorts of things – wonderful, creative, incredible, beautiful, and good things. But also, all sorts of other things, as Jesus points out: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly – just to name a few.

It's the human heart that causes our own impurity, our own defilement, our own stain. And while those things named by Jesus are timeless, there's a poem by Mary Oliver called "Of the Empire," that illustrates a specific form of modern defilement. Take a listen:

We will be known as a culture that feared death
and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity
for the few and cared little for the penury of the
many. We will be known as a culture that taught
and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke
little if at all about the quality of life for
people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All
the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a
commodity. And they will say that this structure
was held together politically, which it was, and
they will say also that our politics was no more
than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of

the heart, and that the heart, in those days,
was small, and hard, and full of meanness.¹

Everything was a commodity. They will say of us that the heart was small and hard and full of meanness. Oh, dear.

Whatever are we going to do about such a predicament? About the predicament of ourselves. The condition of our humanity. The state of our hearts.

If Jesus so pointedly names the problem in this text, you might be wondering what in the world is the solution. Who can take our hearts and make them new?

There was a person with a heart who walked among us; his heart was not small. Or hard. Or mean. It was large. It was soft. It was kind. His heart was beating for the orphans and the widows, the ones who felt forgotten, for the prisoners in prison camps, for the dogs and the rivers, for all of us who have forgotten that we have hearts in the first place. His heart, because it was soft and tender, fleshy and beating, broke over and over again. It broke when he saw how we treated one another. It broke when he saw how we treated the poor. It broke when he saw how we talked to ourselves. It broke when we elevated human tradition above the commandments of God. It broke in a garden in the middle of the night. It broke in death. It broke and broke and broke. But when his heart broke, it did not harden like ours do sometimes. It did not wither or shrink or shrivel up like a sad remnant of itself. It grew in love, it expanded in compassion, it swelled with generosity. It broke like a watermelon breaks – bearing its fleshy fruit for all of us to eat. It broke like water – a ripple creating a current for love to ride. It broke like a loaf of bread – divided for the sake of many.

God's own heart breaks for and with our hearts.

And in God's own breaking, his own life-giving sacrifice, through Jesus' own death and resurrection, we come alive through him. Our hearts can now beat to a different sort of rhythm. Defilement and impurity are washed away. We have been made clean. We are a new creation. We are a new humanity. In and through Jesus Christ, we have been given a new heart. Our hearts, through God, can grow large, soft, and kind.

“Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right spirit within us.”

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¹ From Mary Oliver's *Red Bird* (2008).