

Sunday, September 01, 2024
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Families Ministry and School Chaplain*
on

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

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Oh God my Heart is Ready

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: 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, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen. (Collect for Proper 17)

When I arrived in New York ten summers ago, there was a lot learn around tradition and cultural norms. To be honest, I continue to be unsure of many nuances of language and multiple sporting terms which remain somewhat of a mystery. And yet I have grown to appreciate the significance of unspoken rules, traditions and practices of everyday life as well as the annual American traditions like Thanksgiving and Labor Day, with their emphasis on gathering together in gratitude, feasting and taking time to pause before the next season of the year begins.

Like all traditions it seems there are multiple embedded rules for these special days, that supposedly ‘everyone knows’ whether it is about what to eat, and in the case of this Labor Day weekend what to wear, or rather what not to wear. I do know that looking out to the congregation next week there will no longer be this summery palette of color in the pews but a return to more solemn attire. There will be no wearing of linen, no white shoes, or accessories, until summer returns next year. However, I am still a little perplexed by the significance of this rule, in relation to the origins of Labor Day itself. Earlier this week I asked a few colleagues what would happen if I didn’t keep this particular wardrobe rule, if I for example wore linen next weekend. There were pauses and I received a clear message that no liberties ‘should be taken’. While no penalties would be issued, after all I wouldn’t be breaking the law, I got the message loud and clear, that these clothing rites are deeply embedded rules, and rule breakers would be judged for their poor form. Don’t worry- I won’t wear linen for another year!

Scripture often presents us with themes about traditions, rules and rule breakers, in times of labor and of rest. It is filled with teaching about laws, and constantly challenges the very attitudes that inhabit our body, mind and spirit in everyday life, and especially in our religious practices. Practices that point

us to God or distract us from him, that even define or defile us. Practices that sometimes fuel a spiritual pride alluded to in our Gospel, wherein particular communities assume they have the monopoly on true religion, such as those who jest, ‘We use Rite 1, because it is, the Rite 1’, or are judgmental of those who find other meaningful ways of worshiping God.

Our Collect today offers us this very phrase ‘true religion’ as something that is desirable and good. However, I’m guessing this very Collect, being offered throughout the universal Church is being approached through a very different lens of understanding and I’m guessing ‘true religion’ for many is likely to be aligned to one’s own preferred practices and rituals, and even rules within the liturgy that this very prayer resides.

However, if our very traditions, practices and rituals are solely rule driven they in turn make shallow the Biblical call and purpose of worship, rather than deepen our relationship with *who* we are called to worship. You may have heard of the Jesuit priest and writer, Antony de Mello who illustrates this loss of purpose and intentionality in worship in the tale of the Guru’s cat.

When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship.

After the guru died, the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship.

Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru’s scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

This spiritual anecdote reminds us we all need to take stock at times, of what we do and who we are as a worshipping community. As our Pilgrims and Faith Alive youth know, while its good to wonder at mystery it is also healthy to question, and grow in our understanding of meaning and purpose of our worship and mission.

Of course, Liturgy, meaning the work of the people, can appear to some to be beautiful, dignified, uplifting or solemn. To others it may seem empty of meaning, with no point of reference, and at worst rule ridden and mystifying to visitors who observe, standing and sitting, crossing, peace sharing, bread breaking, Blessing, by people who seem to know what to do and when.

If a newcomer asked you what you do and why in our liturgy: What might you say? Perhaps you are actually unsure what it all means? Or perhaps you have recently drifted from, or rediscovered intentional practices in preparation for Mass? Is coming to church for you an outward or inward sign of being a Christian? Or is it concerned with abiding by certain habits or rules, or even finding a rule of life and commitment to graft in your heart the love of God’s name?

If all of this may seem too huge to contemplate, I suggest you start with a shorter question. How do you, not simply on the outside, but in the prayer of your repentant heart, offer yourself to God? Or how do you welcome and receive Jesus at the time of communion? As I’ve shared before a priest it is most beautiful thing to see people receive the host, the Body of Christ with humility, as something that is

precious, with some holding out their labor worn hands, others create a throne for the Body of Christ or receive with a beam of gratitude, and thank you for an Amen.

Our Gospel reminds us God is concerned with what is within our hearts, and so it is with the Mass that entering into the liturgy is not simply about following a script or set of instructions, rather it is relational. As Fr. Turner and Fr. Gioia have both recently reminded us our posture and practice in worship can deepen what we do, to something we become, it can inhabit us and become part of us and equip us to be not simply recipients but doers of the Word. Participating in the eucharistic, communal action of receiving the Body of Christ allows us not just to be nourished with all goodness, but inhabit the Body of Christ to become the Body of Christ in the world.

As summer comes to a close, I wonder, How will Christ inhabit your life, your heart this fall? Not only at church, but where you labor on and in your places of rest.

As the school year begins and Choristers return to prepare a full range of liturgical offerings once again, I pray that God will increase in us all at Saint Thomas, an open and renewed commitment to 'true religion', in worship and mission. And that as we return to church next week, may we with our Choristers proclaim, *Oh God my heart is ready*.
