

HOLY PRACTICES

Preached by the Rev'd Grace Burton-Edwards on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, 30 October 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; I Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12.

We had a lovely conversation at Journey in Faith this week about our liturgical practices here at Trinity Church. Journey in Faith is a series of classes that we offer to help people learn more about the church, explore their own faith, and prepare for baptism, membership, or confirmation if you are seeking it. If you would like to join us, we meet on Wednesdays. Dinner is at 5:30 and the conversation from 6:30 to 7:30. You are welcome to come at any time. We just started a few weeks ago, so we are just beginning the process.

As we began the process, I asked the group to identify things that were confusing to them about life at Trinity. Like most folks, they had a lot of questions about what they see in the liturgy. When do we kneel and why? What is the sign of the cross and why do people do it? What does the sign people make at the gospel reading mean? So I told them what I always tell people. These are acts of personal piety. We do them because Episcopalians have a deep understanding and respect for the mystery of God's incarnation in Christ Jesus. Because God became incarnate in a human body, we recognize that our bodies can be vehicles of the sacred, so we involve our bodies in worship.

But, I said, no one is required to do any of these things. The ushers do not aware style points. We kneel because it is a posture that helps us submit our wills to God. We make the sign of the cross to align our own identity with the cross of Christ. We bow to offer our own reverence and respect. We do pray that the words of the Gospel will live in our heads, on our lips, and in our hearts. And the people who do these things are so focused on the meaning of what they are doing that they don't notice if others around them are doing them or not. So, no pressure.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus outlined a list of religious practices that many people in his day performed. Like our religious practices, these were holy, good, pious practices. A phylactery was a little box that held a fragment of written scripture. In a time when written words were scarce, these represented a desire to keep the precious words of scripture close to you. The fringes referenced in the reading were the fringes of a prayer shawl. Rabbis were teachers, a good and necessary office, and there was nothing inherently wrong with the term rabbi.

And even the Pharisees themselves, those people who are so often reviled in the gospels, started out with good intentions. The Pharisees were the teachers of the law. They wanted Israel to be free of Roman domination, and they believed that if everyone lived in a really holy way, God would set them free. So they advocated becoming a kingdom of priests to serve God. They took the laws from Leviticus that had originally applied only to priests – laws about hand washing and table fellowship and what to wear - and said that they should apply to everyone. That may have

been what Jesus meant when he accused them of tying up heavy burdens and laying them on the shoulders of others.

The Pharisees had good intentions. And the religious practices of the day started out as holy and pious acts. But from this reading and from others, it is clear that some had forgotten why they were doing what they were doing. The point of these religious practices was to draw people nearer to God's blessing, not serve as an end in themselves. The practices were holy, but Jesus recognized that many people were doing them for less than holy reasons.

And the invitation for us today is to examine the motives behind our own religious practices. Why be part of a church? Why pray? Why study the scriptures? Why serve others? Why embrace justice? Why give? Most people do these things for very holy reasons – to grow in love for God and neighbor. But it is possible, even today, to embrace religious practices in ways that bring harm to us or to others. So in the spirit of our gospel lesson, I humbly offer a short list of less than holy reasons for holy practices. I name these not to heap guilt and burden on us all. I do not want us to leave today beating ourselves up because Rev'd Grace said we're all practicing our faith in the wrong way. My point in naming these matters is that I hope to do what Jesus did in this gospel lesson – set us all free to experience the abundant life of God's kingdom.

Less than holy reason #1 – Practicing religion in order to be seen by others. This was a major concern in the ministry of Jesus. He often preached against the hypocrisy of religious leaders, and certain forms of religious hypocrisy are still a concern in some circles. I recall an awareness of the possibility of practicing religion in this way in my childhood. I lived in the South where there was a certain amount of social pressure to go to church somewhere and say that you were a Christian. One of the gifts of a society that is becoming more secular is that it is now socially acceptable not to practice a faith, which means that those of us who do practice do so because we choose it and want it and find it life-giving.

However, practicing religion in order to be seen by others may still exist today, but in a slightly different form. I see it in our collective need to appear that we have it all together, in our awareness that others are watching us, in our fear to admit to others that we are hurting, even within our own religious community. Yes, our religious practices can and do strengthen us in the face of challenges. I rejoice when people are able to say honestly, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." But you do not have to sing that song all the time. Here in this community, it is okay to admit that life is hard and you do not know where to turn or you have made a scary mistake. It is okay to say that you are not sure what to believe and that some of what have always believed is not making sense. Trust me, others feel the same way. You do not have to put up an invulnerable spiritual front here or anywhere because Jesus has set us free from practicing our faith in order to be seen by others..

Less than holy reason #2 – Practicing a religion in an attempt to make God like you more. It simply cannot be done. God already loves you beyond your wildest idea of love. You are already blessed and beloved. Coming to church, embracing spiritual practices, offering acts of compassion – these do not increase what is already infinite. God's fullest blessing and inheritance have already been showered on us all. Baptism is the sign of that blessing. When we proclaim,

“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever,” we mean forever. You do not have to earn that.

A corollary to this motivation, however, is practicing religion in the hope that God will make your life easier. On one level, spiritual practices really do help. Prayer centers us and can make us less anxious and help us in times of discernment. Religious community gives us people who share the loads of our lives. And I have had times in my own life when a situation has changed dramatically for the better through no action on my part and I can only say, “Thank you, God.” So our faith does help us and God does sometimes intervene. But practicing faith is not a ticket to an easy life. Remember that we follow a crucified savior, one who took the suffering of the world into the very life of God, and we go where he leads the way. So we, too, enter into the suffering of the world, our own and our neighbor's. When we break the bread at the altar, and if you are very quiet you can sometimes hear it snap, it is a reminder for us of the brokenness in us and around us that we share in our life with Christ. Being religious does not make life easier. Things are still broken. We just know that God is with us in it.

Less than holy reason #3 – Turning to religion when we may need some other kind of help. I say this very gently. Religious faith, spiritual practices, Christian community – these are blessed gifts that help us deal with the challenges we face in our lives, and we do benefit when we tap into the gifts of our faith. But sometimes we need other kinds of help, too. I have encountered people in some places, not so much here, but in other kinds of Christian communities, who expect their religious life to solve all of their problems. They could benefit from counseling or medication or talking with a doctor or a 12 step group but they hesitate because turning to these resources somehow feels like a lack of trust in God. And so I simply want to say out loud that God seeks our healing, and God works through many avenues, and sometimes we need to look beyond the church and beyond our own personal resources to receive that healing. It is not a lack of faith to ask for help.

Our religious practices are good and holy gifts, but we can easily offer them for less than holy reasons – because we want others to think we are great or because we are trying to earn a love we do not think we deserve or because we do not want to ask for help or for other reasons as well. We know our hearts. The ministry of Jesus invites us to offer our holy practices simply for this – To open ourselves to the transforming love of God and seek to share that love with others. That is why we do what we do here.

And so I invite you to worship here every week because the worship of God empowers you to be God's person in this world. And pray because prayer changes you. And help others because you cannot help but overflow with the love you have received. And give because you want to be part of what God is doing through this congregation.

And if you examine your conscience and discover that some of your actions may be arising from less than holy motives, do not abandon your practice. Keep worshiping, praying, serving, and giving but invite God to transform you continually in love, just as God transforms the bread and wine into the presence of Christ. Amen.

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