

Sermon Proper 18 B

St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain

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Last week we heard Jesus taking on the Pharisees because they had misunderstood the true meaning of religion. And today that theme is continued for us in our readings. So we are face to face again with this ambiguous word "religion" a word loaded with emotion, a word which many of us might define differently. Pretend for a moment that there is an index card in your pew and you are asked to jot down whatever comes to your mind when you hear the word "religion."

What words and images come to mind? What buildings? home? church? work? school? Are you alone or are there others with you? Whatever your words were, whatever my images are, our scripture this morning gives us a definition of what God is looking for in religion. James tells us clearly.

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?"

Why is this aspect of religion singled out? Not worship or prayer or keeping the commandments or spirituality or fellowship? We might say it's because we need to do these things so that God will not judge us too harshly at the end. But that isn't the real reason why the scripture singles this aspect of religion out for us this morning. It is because this is what God does and we belong to God. We are claimed as Christ's own in baptism. We are called to act as God does.

What does it mean that this is what God does? Well we know from the Scriptures. How does the prophet Isaiah describe the age to come, the messianic age when God will be all in all? "Behold your God will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy."

When God comes you will know it. There will be signs all around you. God's in-breaking will create change everywhere. You can reach out and touch it. And the change will be that those who are held bound will be set free, held bound by chains, or impediments, physical, spiritual, emotional and political bonds will be loosed when the reign of God arrives. People will be made whole. People will be set free from whatever constrains them now.

When John the Baptist was in prison and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he were the Messiah, how does Jesus answer them? Does he say, "Yes I am?" No, he says to John's disciples, go back and tell him that "the blind see, the lame walk, the poor have the gospel preached to them." John and his disciples would know immediately what that answer meant. Those were the signs of the messianic age, the signs that God's reign had begun in Jesus of Nazareth. John the Baptist would know by Jesus' answer that the end time had come, God would bring all things to perfection in his Christ.

And because we belong to Christ we are commissioned as his body, his hands and his feet, called to do what he did, seek out those who are held bound, heal, set free, announce to the poor the reign of God, the mercy of God poured out in Jesus Christ.

So this is what true religion is about. It is about doing what God does, doing what God dreams about, creating a place where the poor have the gospel preached to them. We are called to have a preference for the poor because God does. The Scripture does not tell us what political party to vote for, or what candidates to support or what issues to call our legislators about. No. But it does tell us that we must care for the poor, the unprotected, the widows and orphans, prisoners and all those who are infirm. How we do that will vary by circumstances. But that we do it is not optional. These are the signs of the reign of God, the reign of God described with words like justice and reconciliation. And James challenges us this morning: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers

only, deceiving yourselves." We are baptized into a religion that tells us to act the way God does, to shape our lives by God's dream, to be marked by a faith that does justice.

But this morning's readings are even more than the signs of God's reign. They are about the people who received the miracles of grace and healing. They are about people who couldn't see, suddenly seeing, and about people who couldn't hear, suddenly hearing, and about people who had speech impediments, suddenly speaking. This morning's Gospel is about Jesus in Gentile country, among pagans and unbelievers coming upon a man, sighing out of compassion for his affliction and healing him. And even though Jesus asked the man and his companions not to say anything about the miracle, they couldn't be silenced, they told everybody they ran into, they told total strangers, onlookers and neighbors. They probably told people they would never see again. They said to them all: "See this man, Jesus of Nazareth. He does all things well."

This section of Mark's Gospel comes just before Peter's confession of faith. Mark is trying to tell us that a Gentile and a non-believer had his eyes opened and his ears unstopped and his tongue loosened by the presence and the miracle of God's Son. And some of the disciples still didn't understand. So this miracle of releasing the man to see and to hear and to speak is also what Jesus is trying to do with his disciples, and with each one of us.

We are an incarnational religion, a bodily faith. We can touch and see and feel God at work among us. And the signs of God's salvation are all around us, people healing from broken relationships, people living with and dying with hope, people coping with illness and not giving themselves over to despair, recovering alcoholics and addicts, without drugs today, prisoners coming to faith, healings of body and soul all around us. But we need to have our eyes opened and our ears unstopped to see the miracles of grace and healing

around us and within us- changing us from day to day- transforming us and our world into God's passion- a place of justice, a place where enemies embrace, where dividing walls are torn down- a place where the poor have the gospel preached to them.

And so we come to this liturgy today to pray to see, and to hear and to tell about the in-breaking of God's reign. Where is the reign of God to be found? Wherever people are working for justice, wherever bonds are being loosened and the marginalized and the outsiders are being given the word of salvation. We pray to hear the word of God, to really hear it with ears opened, opened wide by grace. We pray to see the presence of God in one another, in the bread that we break, in the cup that we share. We pray to have our tongues loosened, we most of us Gentiles, so that we, like that other Gentile 2000 years ago, may proclaim the goodness of God because we have encountered the saving presence of Jesus Christ. So that we may

proclaim that presence throughout our lives,  
wherever we find ourselves, whomever we find  
ourselves with. Pray that we may be taken over by  
the gospel. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers  
only." "For you are Christ's and Christ is God's."