

## PENTECOST XXII

*The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying...* Luke 18:11

Pharisees have gotten a bad image, thanks to the Gospels. They have become, in Gospel stories, stock figures: self-righteous, rigid. More concerned with rules than with compassion. More focused on religious rules than on moral insight. Hide-bound, nitpickers. That's how we tend to think of them, thanks to the Gospels.

And thanks not only to the Gospel writers who portray them as knee-jerk traditionalists, predictable adversaries of Jesus. But thanks also to Jesus who, as here, paints the Pharisee as proud, self-satisfied, and pietistic, in contrast to the humble tax-collector.

In truth, Pharisees followed a liberal interpretation of Scripture, and the aim of Pharisaic practice was to educate their followers about Torah, so that all might observe sacred law. Their mode of education may have depended too thoroughly on rote learning and *thou shalt not*, but their goals, in principle, were noble and generous.

And our Pharisee today is first and foremost a religious person, a leader among his fellow Jews, a spiritual guide and teacher for those who desire to obey God's law faithfully. He is scrupulous in religious observance, fasting weekly, and he tithes to the Temple. He's an exemplar to the community and a paragon in his own eyes.

And there's the problem. He's a paragon in his own eyes. *He's not like other people thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors.* Not him. He's above reproach and, apparently, above self-reproach.

Which raises the question, or at least, Jesus raises the question—why is he religious? What is his motivation? Is he religious so that he can feel good about himself, so that he can feel set apart, different from, and above, less perfect folk?

James Carroll had an op ed in Monday's **Globe** entitled **Ignorance of Religion Isn't Bliss**. His argument is that ignorance about religion—our own as well as about other faith traditions—such ignorance leads to violence, killing, war, and general death-dealing.

He says, *I am a religious person because I believe that religion can be a way of resisting violence. But that assumes a religion both self-critical and repentant for all the ways it keeps getting sucked into violence — especially with fantasies of a violent God.*

We know that Jim Carroll is a Roman Catholic at heart, though he may attend an Episcopal Church, and I assume that his belief that religion can be a way of resisting violence is grounded in the tradition, teachings, practices and disciplines of his faith. I'm curious about how he would expand on how, in particular, religion can and should be instrumental in the resistance to and avoidance of violence.

But what hooked me about his column, intelligent and persuasive as it all was, was the question of what makes one a religious person. If I ask myself, *why am I a religious person*, what do I say?

Very often we hear people say, "I'm not religious, but I'm very spiritual." Honestly, I have very little idea what this means. I know it means one thing, it means, *I don't go to church*. But that's a negative definition, and it doesn't tell me a thing positively about what being *very spiritual* means.

I think everyone who says "I'm not religious, but I'm very spiritual," probably means something. Maybe they could spell it out, maybe not. And I also believe that the statement means something slightly different to everyone who utters it, unless I hear it from a number of members of the same cult. But it can be murky.

Whereas, when someone says, *I'm religious*, that seems to me to mean something definite. It means that that someone does go to church, or engages in some discipline related to a religion. And religion is *the belief in and worship of a god or gods, or a set of beliefs concerning the origin and purpose of the universe*. (Wikipedia)

But then there's the question of *why* people are religious. And, in fairness, our motives are perhaps as varied as the ideas people have when they claim to be very spiritual.

So I've been asking myself why *I'm* religious. One answer is that I was born into the Episcopal Church, baptized and married at St Mary the Virgin, the parish church built by my great-great grandfather and where my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were also baptized and married. My great-grandmother, I've recently learned, traveled from Portland Maine, without her husband, in 1919 to Detroit and in 1922 to Portland Oregon, to attend the Episcopal Church's General Convention as a Deputy to the Women's Triennial. My grandmother was a life-long church-goer and, when she died, a member of the Hunger Committee at the same St Mary's. My mother was the first woman Senior Warden in the diocese of Maine, again at St. Mary's, and was serving again on that same vestry up until the year my father died, when she was 84.

So religion, and specifically Episcopalianism, was bred in my bone, and I have never sought or needed any other spiritual home.

I do remember, during my seminary days, how many of us, women particularly, wondered aloud why we stayed in the institutional Church at all. My answer, then, was that the Church is one institution that has to pretend, at least, to listen when we talk about justice. The corporate world, for example, not so much.

I was reminded of that answer last Tuesday, when I traveled with three other priests from our diocese, and representatives of all the other diocese of Province One, New England, to testify before the national church's Standing Liturgical Commission about our experiences with same-sex marriage. The Commission is charged with developing a rite or rites to use in these marriages, and their work is critical. Because this is how official change often happens in the Episcopal Church, through changes in our liturgy.

After marriage equality became legal in Massachusetts, we were prohibited from pronouncing people legally married or signing marriage licenses because the Prayerbook rubrics describe marriage as between a man and a woman, and all the vows presume heterosexual couples. That was the legal reality in 1979, and the Prayerbook reflects that.

But the legal reality has changed, and the Church is trying to grapple with the change.

I was not thrilled about making the journey; we've been talking about all this for a very long time. But I'm more than glad I went. It was moving and instructive to hear from all the different diocese, which all have different stories to tell. Rhode Island's bishop is adamantly opposed to same-sex marriage, which is of course not legal there yet. Only one brave priest came and testified – all the other dioceses had 4 to 8 people present – and he has attended marriage equality rallies against the specific orders of his bishop.

In Western Mass, where marriage equality is of course legal, the bishop has not granted approval for priests to celebrate those marriages. He says he does not want “to alienate the Africans.” The new bishop of Connecticut, where marriage is also legal, follows for now the policy of his predecessor, which is to do nothing on the matter of sacramental marriage.

In New Hampshire and Vermont, legal marriage states, the bishops have put nothing in writing about sacramentally celebrating same-sex marriage. Gene Robinson doesn't want to give any more ammunition to his detractors, and Tom Ely, of Vermont,

“wants to keep his relationships with his fellow bishops strong.” So it’s Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, which, as one of my colleagues said, the Church invented.

In Maine, the legislative and executive passing of marriage equality was overturned in a heartbreaking referendum a year ago, but the bishop there had been strong and vocal in his support for equality and had been preparing his priests to be able to celebrate sacramental marriages.

And here in Massachusetts, Bishop Shaw has, of course, stepped out in front, and given us a pastoral letter permitting us to celebrate fully the marriages of same-sex couples.

We also heard from priests, gay and straight, and gay couples, about their experiences and their pleas to the Commission. My friend and brilliant theologian Ellie McLaughlin asked the Commission to be mindful of the clear distinction between the *contract* of civil marriage and the *sacrament* of the Church’s blessing. One member of a gay couple said, “when you are in a commitment that’s difficult to get out of, like marriage, it forces you to deal more honestly with the dark places in yourself, and therefore you draw closer to God.” A gay priest told of being married, in essence, three times over, just to be sure that she and her wife would be in the best possible legal and canonical standing wherever she was called to serve.

The folks Western Mass said, “we beg you to hurry up. Our bishop is waiting for your conclusions.” They sounded almost desperate. The man from Rhode Island could hardly express hope; I think he was just grateful to be able to tell his story.

There were about 20 people listening to us that day. I’m not sure I’ve ever spoken to a group who seemed more attentive, more concerned, and apparently more engaged in what they were hearing. There was no back and forth, no time for formal questions, no argument. But I think we were all aware that, in all their meetings around the country, this was the only time, except when they were hearing from Iowa and D.C, that there would be stories of joy, celebration, and gratitude. Nowhere else would they hear, over and over, not only the desperate need of the faithful to have their unions fully, sacramentally recognized and celebrated, but also to hear the rejoicing and fulfillment and thankfulness of those who have been so blessed, and those of us who have been the instruments of bestowing that blessing on behalf of the Church.

Rarely have I been more appreciative of my membership in this Church. The hearing was not an exalted experience, like the first same-sex wedding I celebrated here, or like Gene Robinson’s consecration as bishop, or my own ordination to the priesthood.

No, it was a thoughtful, often painful, reflective experience of witness, a quiet, consistent testimony of faithfulness on the part of those who have waited so long for justice to arrive. And to the faithfulness of the Church, in her listening, and in her slow but real response to our voices.

Why am I religious? I could talk all day and never answer the question fully. (But I won't) I have many answers, all of them true. As do all of us, my dear friends. I believe it's worth pondering the question, and not being fearful of the answers. Because the result, for me, has been humbling. I feel humbled by the strength and depth of my heritage, and awed and grateful for the faithfulness of the Church today. And humility, Jesus tells us, is what will be exalted in the end.

Alleluia! Amen