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Pentecost 11 Year C
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Finding Good Religion

You know that I like to ask questions in my sermons. A question for this morning is this: What is it that people do not like about religion?

After hearing the gospel it's not hard to imagine why some might lump all religion into the same dubious pursuit. Often times, as we will see, the problem with religion are those who practice it most stridently.

The leader of the synagogue is a perfect example. We hear: Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. This unnamed woman was bent over and unable to stand up straight.

One can only imagine if she had heard Psalm 71 if she had gotten close to the synagogue before.

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

It doesn't happen much in Exeter, but when I served the cathedral in downtown Hartford, with an active soup kitchen on the property, we were always prepared for the unexpected - for people to come in off the streets during the service. Some would walk down the middle aisle, talking away, in the middle of the sermon - it didn't much matter - and they would find a place to settle.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Yet another story of healing in the gospels. There are many. Someone broken was made whole. Someone on the outside because of their condition was brought into the center. Someone who had been kept down - literally in this case, bent over - was lifted up. She was invited to stand with dignity as a daughter of Abraham. Now she was named.

This should be a moment of public celebration. A true sign of God's power. Imagine the feeling of relief and freedom and thankfulness she must have felt. But the religion police

cried foul. The reason: the healing was on the Sabbath. This was not the first time Jesus crossed this line. He crossed it because there was no more time to wait for God to bless this woman with a chance to be made whole again. To ease her pain. To lighten her load. To give her comfort. She has waited eighteen long years: enough!

We then see on display Jesus' long running distaste for hypocrisy and hypocrites – those who live their lives as if on a stage being watched by others. Hypocrisy has many shades – often it involves saying one thing out of one side of one's mouth and doing another. I remember the ultimate put-down when I was in high school was to call someone "two-faced" – essentially a phony. Who here this morning would ever like to be accused of hypocrisy?

So, is it hypocrisy that gives religion such a bad name? After all, one would have expected a leader of the synagogue to have had an ounce of compassion for the woman on any day.

Certainly, a low hanging fruit of any critique of religion is the hurt, shame and damage it can cause. One could rightly point out the wars that have been started under the banner of religion. The Crusades in the Middle Ages were not our finest hour as thousands of Muslims and other innocents were slaughtered in an effort to re-Christianize the Holy Land. The Church of England, our mother church's break with Rome 500 years ago was violent and bloody. And then there were the witch trials, the burnings at the stake, the stoning's, the Scarlet Letters, the inquisitions and *Jihads*.

Others have viewed religion is an abstraction or a distraction from reality. Marx famously called religion the opium of the people.

God save us from bad religion and flawed religious authorities!

How do you and I connect with a genuine faith in light of too many cases of religion going off the rails? How do we follow the heart of Christianity and avoid the pitfalls of legalism, excess and judgement?

We can always lift up the prophet Micah who gave us the ultimate and simple test for good religion: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? In a nutshell, that is one way to know and remember to put our actions to the test.

In the reflections at the back of the bulletin this morning – which I hope catches your attention each week -- we read in the commentary: Jesus is showing that the law of God is for human and humane purposes and not simply a rigid rule to beat down others.

Simply stated: true and good religion lifts people up and does not hold us back and keep us down.

The Sabbath day, for Christians the day of the Resurrection – Sunday – is meant to be one day each week to rest, gather, refresh, pray, and lift up and enjoy the blessings given to us.

I often like to say that coming to church on a Sunday in New Hampshire (to sing hymns written 300 years ago) is one of the most counter-cultural things you can do in this part of the country where the call is often more to the great outdoors than around an altar. Yet we return to give thanks, pray and remember – at an altar filled with the presence of the risen Christ in the bread and the wine. A pretty good place to return to. A place, we hope, of forgiveness and not shame. A place where we are lifted up.

Scholar of religion Karen Armstrong writes: “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, of self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology.” (The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness)

The lesson of this gospel reading may be to remind us of all those in our lives, in our world, who have been suffering for years and no one has seen or heard them.

Ours is a call to follow the one who always found ways to put the person before the tradition. May we find ways to put the dignity of every human being before anything else.