Sermon, September 1, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

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;

That's the second time you've heard today's opening prayer. Did that phrase "increase in us true religion" cause you to pause? Do we really need more religion in today's world, especially with the rise of white Christian nationalism, and who gets to decide what is true about it? Here's what Steve Pankey, Rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Bowling Green Kentucky says:

Who in their right mind would pray to God for an increase in "true religion"? I mean, really, religion? If God answers your prayer, it might be great for you, but the rest of the world hopes they never have to deal with you. Over the course of the last fifty-years or so, being religious has increasingly become a stigma that most people don't want to carry. Mention the word, "religion" to most folks and their minds are immediately flooded with visions of Pharisees arguing over handwashing, Jehovah's Witnesses arriving at supper time to hand out Watchtower tracts, or angry mobs carrying "God hates you" banners. Others picture Roman Catholic bishops and priests covering up decades of child abuse. For many young people, when they hear the word "religion", they imagine large groups of "anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, out of touch, over politicized, insensitive, exclusive and dull" people gathered to sing unsingable hymns and listen to droning preachers who live to hear themselves talk. To be called religious these days has become nothing short of a pejorative.

Pheww, yeah, give me a little more of that old-time religion dear Lord. But to be fair, let's look at the history of that prayer. The definition of the word religion has evolved over time to where now it means a set of beliefs or principles, ideas about God, religious institutions, and human beings; it categorizes, organizes, objectifies, and divides people into exclusive worlds of right versus wrong, true versus false, "us" versus "them." But when this prayer was first written by Archbishop Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book, religion meant something quite different. *religio* meant faith— living, subjective experience including

love, veneration, devotion, awe, worship, transcendence, trust, a way of life, an attitude toward the divine or nature. So when we pray for true religion, we are praying for a deeper sense of awe that can be felt only when we are brought to the very presence of God Almighty, through a relationship with his only Son our Lord, and a fire in our hearts kept alive through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Note that in the same collect after we prayed for this increase in true religion, we prayed to be nourished with all goodness and to be able to bring forth the fruit of good works. As our relationship with God is strengthened and as we are nourished with goodness again and again, we become ready for the other half of true religion: good works, which brings us to our epistle from the Letter of James. He writes that there are only two characteristics of true religion, "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." That's it. Care for orphans and widows and keep your nose clean.

And who are the orphans and widows today? The unhoused, the refugee, the immigrant, the transgendered and the many who still line up when a food pantry is opened. Also in today's epistle, James says to be "doers of the word and not just hearers" We think of that in dramatic terms but sometimes it's the smallest acts. Take Oseola McCarty who was an African-American woman born into a poor family in rural Mississippi in 1908. She made her living by washing clothes. She did try an automatic washer and dryer in the 1960s, but found that "the washing machine didn't rinse enough, and the dryer turned the whites yellow." This is how she describes her typical work day:

I would go outside and start a fire under my wash pot. Then I would soak, wash, and boil a bundle of clothes. Then I would rub 'em, wrench 'em, rub 'em again, starch 'em, and hang 'em on the line. After I had all of the clean clothes on the line, I would start on the next batch. I'd wash all day, and in the evenin' I'd iron until 11:00. I loved the work. The bright fire. Wrenching the wet, clean cloth. White shirts shinin' on the line."

When she retired in 1995 at the age of 87, her hands painfully swollen with arthritis, this washerwoman who had been paid in little piles of coins and dollar bills her entire life had $280,000 in the bank. Even more startling, and influenced by a religious faith cultivated by being a lifetime member of the Friendship Baptist Church, she decided to give most of it

away—not as a bequest, but immediately. Setting aside just enough to live on, McCarty donated $150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to fund scholarships for worthy but needy students seeking the education she never had.

Each time we do even the smallest tasks, if we do them with our full attention and mind, we are doers of the word – and if we are faithful in small things, we will be faithful in large things. Just like Oseola. Tomorrow is Labor Day which was created when labor activists pushed for a federal holiday to recognize the many contributions workers have made to America's strength, prosperity, and well-being. I know that many here are past the time of actively earning a paycheck. Does that make Labor Day irrelevant? I say no. Anytime we are a "doer of the word" we are laboring to build up the reign of God. So many of you here are God's laborers, God's doers of the word. You give here at St. Luke's by helping with the liturgy, helping at coffee hour, taking care of the yard, volunteering to bring food to a funeral reception. You give to your community at local food pantries or feeding programs. Many of you care for grandchildren or great-grandchildren. It all adds up to labor for the reign of God, being a doer of the Word.

Can we pray that God might increase in us **true** religion, foster that ongoing relationship in us, that we might be continually awed by God's presence, that God might teach us what is good and nourishing, and motivate us to serve?

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. ***Amen.***