

Religion: Binding or Setting Free

From the series: Moving On To Maturity

Text: Isaiah 46:3-4; Ephesians 1:17-19; Matthew 23:15

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I hope you got up this morning and said, "Ah, Sunday. We get to go to church." If you got up and said, "It's Sunday; we have to go to church," I hope you feel a little guilty for about five minutes, but not much longer than that.

Religion ought to be an experience of joy and liberation, and Sunday worship ought to be the crown of it all, the time when we find inspiration and encouragement and new reason to live zestfully. I find that what I am dealing with this morning pops up on my chart quite often. The fact that religion ought to be a source of freedom. I would like to be known as the singer of the song of the soul set free.

Some Lents ago I preached a rather strange sermon, admittedly; it was a sermon about the insurrectionist that was crucified with Jesus. Now, not the good one, you know. Everybody preaches on the good one. After all, the good one pleaded for mercy in the end and got this wonderful promise from Jesus. But I preached on the one that remained belligerent, cursing through his teeth to his last breath, finding therein something I thought rather heroic. I suppose because of my own Libertarianism and contrariness, perhaps. But I thought it was probably not biblically accurate, but interesting. However, someone got really angry with me about that and came in to see me, and said to me, "All you preach is freedom and grace and in my work, I find out that what people need are rules and guidance and discipline." And it was a moment of awakening for me. I think I didn't react defensively, I just smiled and I said, "Well, they won't get it from me." And it was a moment of awakening wherein I recognized that I am not a complete preacher. No one has ever accused me of balance. I think balance is boring, and balance ends up in making no point deeply, and I can't be everything. I have been shaped in a certain way and had certain kinds of experiences, and that has enabled me to put my finger on what I discern is a very important niche to be filled - that is to seek to save people from religion, to set people free, free from religion, especially religion. And I have been doing that now for a long time and as this morning we continue in this series, "Moving On To Maturity," I simply want to say what I've said here many times but find that it needs to be said again and again because

there is something intrinsic in religion that tends to bind and cripple the human personality rather than setting a person free. So, this morning, let me say I am the herald of good religion that releases and sets free, and I would speak a word against that religion that binds the soul and becomes a burden to be borne, because there is a lot of religion that way.

We need to recognize how religion arose in the first place. It didn't just drop down out of heaven, and it is not something that God gave to us, but it is something that we have created in our attempt to respond to God in the early beginnings of what we call the human, the beginnings of consciousness, of self-consciousness. There was the growing awareness of one's existence, how fragile it is, how perilous it is, and inevitably with the emergence of the human come questions of meaning and of purpose. From whence have we come and whither are we going, and what is the meaning of it, anyway? Life with its passages and its perils is not easy to negotiate, and in the early dawning of human consciousness these deeply existential questions began to be asked, and then someone saw a bush that burned and wasn't consumed. Someone entered the temple and it was filled with smoke and the pillars of the temple were shaking. Someone looked at a man and said, "The Lamb of God." Someone was going on the road to Damascus and a bright light encountered him and a voice spoke to him. In our own tradition, but we could duplicate that in all the great religious traditions, there was someone sometime who had some kind of experience and, to the extent that that experience spoke to the reality of his or her situation, and to the extent that as it was shared, it resonated with the experience of others, there was a gathered community and then a gathered community that became a tradition, and that experience was reduced to a teaching and a ritual through which one worshipped and a way of life. And so, we have the great religions that are based on a founding experience and have taken on a certain institutional form, and those great religions continue to serve people as life maps, to give orientation, to answer those alternate questions of life as we live in the mystery of our existence before that Ultimate Mystery that bears us. That's the nature of religion.

If you were here in May when we welcomed our eighth graders into the continuing pilgrimage of faith, you heard me say to them that all we could give to them was secondhand religion and that really is what institutional, traditional religion is - it's secondhand religion, and I quoted a statement of William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he said, "Such an ordinary religious person, his religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit." And that's really true, when you think about it. There is the experience that someone else had. There's the tradition that conveys it. There is the form by which it is fixed by imitation or repetition, and continued by habit. So, most of us are what we were born to be; we are within the tradition and that understanding with which we were born and nurtured, and our religion secondhand. Now, hopefully it becomes the occasion for fresh experience, for firsthand experience. But, institutional religion is, after all, a commodity which inevitably tends, in its

institutional forms which are necessary, it tends to become a burden rather than that which lifts the burden. It tends to become another obligation for which we feel responsible and it becomes burdensome.

Second Isaiah, with the Jews in exile in Babylon, gives us a marvelous picture of religion that has become a burden. Baal and Nibo were the chief gods of the Babylonians and the Jews in exile would see on New Year's Day the grand processions of the images of the gods, down from their pedestals, taken on parade around the walls of the city. The problem with the Jews in exile was that it seemed to them that these gods must be the chief gods because where was their God? They were in exile; they were in captivity. So, the prophet has to remind them that their God is the creator of the heavens and the earth. He has to have them remember who their God really is, and in drawing this picture with a little satire and humor, he pictures the images of the gods being taken from their pedestals and put on beasts of burden and carried out of town, not in a New Year's feast, now, but because the enemy is at the gate and what they're trying to do is save their gods. Now, if you don't get a little laugh out of that, you see, their gods are going into captivity; they've got to rescue their gods! For gods' sake, they have to take care of their gods! And the prophet says to them, "Look at them, carrying off their gods in order that they not be taken into captivity and their images can't say a word, they can't save, they become a burden to be borne." And then, in contrast to that, he sets forth these words from the Lord, "Listen to me, O house of Jacob and all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb, even to your old age, I am God. Even when you turn gray, I will carry you. I have made and I will bear. I will carry and I will save."

God is not a god that needs to be rescued or a burden to be borne, but a God Who carries, a God Who lifts, a God Who rescues, and a God Who saves.

Now, we can laugh at the silly Babylonians for putting all that stock in those images that they put on beasts of burden. Can't you see the idols sort of tipping off because the poor, old beast can't handle it and the idol's nose is dragged in the dust as it's going out of town in order to be rescued. And we can laugh at that, and the prophet intended this satire to be biting, but our religion so easily becomes that. Take, for example, the Church. Ask me about the Church. It's not so easy to keep the machinery going; it's not so easy to keep the budget up to snuff, and then all of the programs of the church - how many pulpit announcements don't jerk you just a little bit, add just a pinch of guilt? And if you didn't get up this morning and say, "Oh, thank God it's Sunday; I get to go to church," maybe you were saying, "Oh, what a beautiful summer day. But, I suppose we'd better go to church. There was poor old Dick slaving all Saturday and he's going to sit on his stool and nobody there, we'd better go." There's so many good people who support religion for all the wrong reasons. I've known a lot of good church leaders that way. They remind me of what Mark Twain said, "A good man in the worst sense of the word." Think about that.

I do thank God for responsible people and serious people and people who bear the burden in the heat of the day and who keep it going, but I have to tell you - it can turn religion into a burden and it misses the intention. It makes religion an end in itself rather than a means to the end of setting the soul free and finding a way to sing and shout and dance. Religion is a means to an end, it's not an end in itself, and when it becomes organized and institutionalized and established well, it becomes something that has to be kept up. Just look around us today - all the stuff about religion in the newspaper, about plastering the Ten Commandments on every wall in the schools and in the courts. We want to have children pray in school. Why? Not because we're so concerned about the spiritual life of people, but rather because we are afraid the morality of the nation is unraveling and we have to keep the Ten Commandments up there, and we've got to get children praying and we have to expose them to all this. We have to utilize religion in order to keep society from disintegrating and that makes religion oppressive; it uses religion; it makes religion a tool, and it sours us. Religion used for any other purpose than the worship of God, dancing before God Who sets the soul free, is bad religion, good for family values, good for community values, good for maintaining the civilization in the West, and all of that misses the point, and all of it abuses and misuses religion, and all of it makes religion a burden to be borne.

In the Church, my philosophy over the years of programming has been do only as much as you have to. I never try to scratch where people don't itch. The things that will meet human need are the things that will be supported, people will be there. Otherwise, you have an elaborate program and you plead with people to participate in these good things we have prepared. The whole society today is organizing all kinds of good things for me to do that I don't want to do. I don't need to do them, and the Church can be as guilty, and maybe more guilty than any other social organization in providing all sorts of "stuff." It becomes a burden, and the more serious you are, the more conscientious you are, the more you are inclined to support this project. It's like the PTA - everybody ought to support the PTA, everybody ought to support the United Fund, everyone ought to support Boy Scouts in America, everybody ought to support the Cancer Drive, whatever drive there may be, and, for God's sake, we ought to support the Church. A community needs a church. It makes for a good community. It just makes for better people. All such reasoning misses the point completely. We imitate the Babylonians hoisting their gods off the pedestals onto the beasts of burden and trying to guide them and keep them from falling, trying to get them out of town so the gods can be saved. I don't think anyone here is into that kind of religion, but if there is, you really need a sabbatical - get cleansed of it or you'll never be able to enjoy God. If your religion is heavy with obligation under the tyranny of ought, the musts, and the shoulds, you are burdened.

Jesus certainly knew that. When I read the 23rd chapter of Matthew, as other Gospel passages of conflict, I always want to say the controversy is probably

between Matthew and those he was in conflict with rather than reflective of Jesus in his time. However, certainly Matthew was reflective of the spirit of Jesus and the intention of Jesus, and one of the reasons that Jesus got into such serious trouble was that he didn't support that kind of institutional religion that had become a burden, and in the 23rd chapter of Matthew we read, "You bind heavy burdens on people that they cannot bear and you don't yourself." He said the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat so when they teach, they are teaching you Moses, the Mosaic tradition, that's fine. But, don't do as they do." And in the conclusion to that chapter he says, "Woe to you. You go all over the world and make a proselyte and once you have a proselyte, you've made him twice over the child of Hell, binding heavy burdens on people, trying to make them religious and all of it turns upside down what it's really all about, which is setting the soul free."

Jesus was so strong against the conventional wisdom of his day that put people in their places and through their paces, and he violated all of the taboos in the interest of people with that sense he had of the graciousness of God.

What we do with bad religion is scandalize God. What kind of a God is it, anyway? A stern, demanding parent who created us and then keeps us in our adolescence, treating us as naughty children. The biblical paradigm of paradise and fall adds to that. We're guilty sinners. Are we guilty sinners? Well, let's go to Kosovo, or let's look into our own heart. Of course, we are. But, not because we have fallen from some pristine perfection, but because we are still clawing our way out of the jungle, and we haven't made as much progress as we should have made. But, I will tell you what - that stern, demanding father doesn't help any. Rather, it binds us in our rebellion and it keeps us in our immaturity.

God is for us! This is what Paul was trying to say. If I had more time this morning, I could have read the whole first chapter of Ephesians, those first fourteen verses fairly soar as Paul talks about the eternal, everlasting grace of God, His loving us, knowing us before the foundations of the world and working things out according to his purposes. A grand, grand passage. And then Paul comes to address his people in Ephesus personally, where he says, "I pray for you that God will enlighten the eyes of your understanding, that the inner being will be illumined that you might come to know what is the hope to which he calls you. What are the riches of the inheritance which is yours, what is the power available to you, the very power and resurrection." Paul says, "Oh, I hope you're getting it. I pray to God that He will help you to see it." You see, Paul was the one who had that pounding vision; Paul had his soul on fire and he said to these people, "It's so grand, the grace of God is so big, so rich, so wonderful! I hope that you have come to see it."

When religion is used as a means for everything else other than dancing before God, it becomes a burden to be borne rather than a gift to be celebrated, and it binds the human soul rather than setting free.

I want to say this clearly this morning - there are religious observances that are important and helpful. Talking about religious observances, which I've been rather hard on this morning, C. S. Lewis said, "When we carry out our religious duties, we are like people digging channels in a waterless land in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready. There are happy moments, even now, when a trickle creeps along the dry beds, and happy souls for whom this happens often." Obviously I know that there are certain religious observances that we go through and sometimes going through them, there's no electric shock, no lightning strikes, but we do have a pattern of religious life, and we do that because we know that, now and again, here and there, there will be a trickle of water, fresh breath, new insight, deep resting in grace. And so, we keep coming and we keep opening ourselves, and we keep practicing. But, all the time we know it's not to keep the community healthy or the nations sound or our accounts square with a stern, demanding God, heavenly parent. But, we do it because now and again we've tasted grace. We know the taste of cool, running water, and we long more and more to be lifted by that experience.

There was once a pastor who had a little boy who used to come down from the parsonage to the study on the parking lot here every morning to say to his father who was the preacher, "Daddy, what day is it?" The father would say, "Tuesday."

"Oh, good."

He would come down again, "Daddy, what day is it?"

"Thursday."

"Oh, good."

"Saturday."

"Good."

"Sunday."

"Ahhhh," and he would go into a wailing temper tantrum. Sunday; ugly Sunday. Well, God has a special grace for preachers' kids, and the preacher was a stern father and a demanding heavenly parent type and he broke the child's will and the child eventually came to church. But that story always amused me because I think it reflects the experience of many of us growing up. Sunday. Church.

You don't have to come, but come when you need to. Come, like digging up channels in a waterless land, and just maybe, just maybe there will be a trickle of water. And, if it's rules and guidance and structure that you need, check down the street. But, if you need a shot of grace, I'll see you every Sunday.