

The Religious Question

Pentecost X

Micah 6:6-8; Luke 10:25-37

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Spring Lake, Michigan
August 5, 2001

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The religious question continues to fascinate me and to absorb my time and energy. Some of you, perhaps, have not had the misfortune I have had, and that is to have to go through a total revolution of one's understanding of what the religious question is all about. For me, religion had been packaged very neatly in a confessional statement, in a creedal form, in a community whose identity was created by a very definite set of beliefs and mores and ethical insights. The whole nature of religion in my growing up and maturing and even in my early ministry was so far from that which I understand it now to be. Some years ago someone said, "You know, as old as he is, you'd think he would have gotten some answers by now." But, for me, the pilgrimage was not from questions to answers, but rather, from answers to questions. And so, I want to think with you this morning and throughout this month of August a little bit about religion, the nature of it, the function of it, and the origin of it – and this morning, the religious question, the whole matter of this phenomenon in which we are fellow passengers and journey mates, the religious adventure, the religious life, the religious community.

A lawyer came to Jesus one day and said, "Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In the paragraph from the prophet Micah, we have the question raised, "With what shall I come before the Lord then, with what shall I bow down before the most high?" That sounds like a serious question. The lawyer's question may well have been an intellectual game, an attempt to trip up Jesus and expose him as something less than a significant rabbi. But, there was a night in Philippi when the earth shook and the jail was opened, and the prisoners set free, when the jailer cried out to Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" And there was a rich young man recorded in Mark's gospel – in fact, the text perhaps I should better have chosen than the one from Luke – in which the same question as the lawyer's is raised, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus suggested the Commandments, to which the young man said, "I have kept these from my youth up." And then Jesus said, "Sell all you have and give to the poor," and he went away grieved because he had great possessions. That, obviously, was a serious question.

There are those questions, and religion, as a matter of fact, is a human response to those kinds of questions. For me, earlier on, it was a question of how one might live and die and find union with God in another time and place, in another sphere or dimension of reality. But, more and more for me, religion becomes the question of how to live here and now and what is the meaning of life. What is the meaning of human existence? We are the only animals, as far as we know, that have the gift of self-consciousness and awareness that causes us to wrestle with questions like that, for we become bonded to another and then we lose the other and there is grief and pain and separation and we wonder - what is life and what is death? And as we look about us, the record of human history is a record of very great suffering and tragedy, and we experience that in our own individual lives and the lives of those we love. There is pain and there is loss. There is confusion. There is so much ambiguity in our human situation. It is difficult to sort it all out. Finally, life is a question. Or, life presents us with a question. Maybe the ultimate philosophical question would be, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

It was very easy for me at one time to answer those questions because there was a revelation that came directly from God, a revelation that found expression through the prophets, culminated in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ recorded in the scriptures, which were inspired by God and therefore inerrant and infallible and, consequently, religion was a matter of having the answers in a book to the mysteries of life.

But, life has a way of overturning those certainties and of putting the lie to much that seems so taken for granted. Human experience is very messy. It cannot be crammed into a system with all of the loose ends tied up. And the longer one lives, the more one lives with openness and reflection and thoughtfulness and attention and awareness, the more one recognizes that ultimately there are questions before which we live, and more and more I come to see religion as that attempt on the part of humankind to deal with those ultimate questions. For, as a matter of fact, what is your life, as James wrote. What must you do to inherit eternal life? What must you do to be saved? What does it even mean to be saved? What's it all about, this human existence we live day by day? That is the religious quest.

I suppose the first thing that strikes me, as I think about it, is how I see the religious quest as so very normal and so very natural. I didn't always think so. At one time, I thought that the religious ones were a slim minority and that the foundations of even that which remained were eroding. And now, I realize that the only things that change are the forms of that religious expression, the institutional forms.

I remember when I was in Europe in the 60s, the tumultuous 60s, there was a phrase, "Will the Church be alive in '85?" Well, the year is 2001 and the Church is still alive. And yet, if you look at the big picture, what is happening to the institutional forms of religion? I have come to see one really doesn't have to

worry about that. I used to worry about it. I wondered if there would be a church in which I could continue to feed my habit. And now I know, whatever form it may be, to be human is to be engaged in that religious quest. Oh, I know one like me is a warped individual because I live it and eat it and sleep it. It is my profession. It is what I do, thinking about these things. And I know the rest of you have to make a living, and you really don't have the luxury I do of thinking and thinking and thinking some more. But as a matter of fact that is a luxury, because it does stop one in one's tracks, for one becomes aware of how life can just pass through our hands like sands through our fingertips, and how much we can live without stopping consciously to evaluate what we are doing and where we are going and why we are caught up in the frantic pace which marks so much of our days.

I see it symbolically, for example, in television. Let me just point to the Today Show. Nancy always wants to see what the weather is going to be. But, you know, the poor weather forecaster hardly has time to give you the weather forecast. It is shoved in between all of the life-changing messages that come from all of the corporate sponsors. And so, finally, one is exposed to about ten minutes of commercials in order to get about 90 seconds of what the weather will be, and then it's wrong. But, the point is this - more and more of life is in your face, and less and less are we called apart simply to be and to contemplate and reflect on the meaning of it all. Such reflection and contemplation is really what religion is all about, and it is a normal and a natural and an inevitable human activity. However it may find expression, however it may work itself out in our lives, there is that religious dimension. I think we're made that way. I think we're created with a hole in our soul that longs to be filled with the sacred, the holy, with a sense of meaning and purpose, with understanding.

So, religion isn't going to go out of business. We are going to be religious to the extent that we are human and the only question is what form or shape will that religious quest take.

I learned that that quest takes place in all of the great major faith traditions. For me, that was also revolutionary. It is not revolutionary for me to say that here in this place, because we have dealt with it often enough. So, it becomes almost commonplace for us. But, if you were raised and trained like I was, you know that it is not commonplace at all. And if you were in most places of worship this morning, you would know that it wouldn't be commonplace at all. But to come to understand religion for what it is, that deep quest of the human spirit for meaning and for understanding, moves one to a place where one can move from exclusivism – as though we have the last and final word and the absolute truth – to a place of pluralism where we recognize that all those major faith traditions are doing exactly the same thing that we are doing. In all of those particular forms of religious expression, in all of those great traditions, there are these same questions that are moving it, motivating it, energizing the quest.

The practice of religion, in all of its variety and forms, is finally an attempt to understand who we are, what does it mean, what do I do to inherit eternal life, what must I do to be saved, or to be human or whole, or at least on the way toward wholeness. We have come to understand here that all of those particular religions are human, creative, imaginative constructs. We build our religions. We create our religions. As someone has written, all of our present religions are the ossified remains of past ecstatic or prophetic visions: Moses at the burning bush, or Mohammed, or Jesus, or the Buddha and the experience of enlightenment. And from those momentary epiphanies or moments of revelation, that luminosity that opens up heaven and suddenly gives some sense and expression, there is a resonance which creates a community which then is bound together around that particular vision. Religion is a human endeavor. It is a creative, imaginative, human construct. So, all of this foolishness about my religion is better than yours, or my God is better than yours, or my religion is true and all of the rest are false is simply quite ridiculous.

Every once in a while in my Tuesday noon luncheons at Duba's, my good friend, Duncan Littlefair, will look across the table at me and say, "How could you have stayed there so long?" And I say, "I wonder the same thing." When once one sees the nature of the religious quest, and sees the respective religions as so many human attempts to engage in that quest, then it must be arrogance to say that I have it and you don't.

I remember moments, don't you, moments in the past when it did flit through my head that that was hardly a reasonable assumption. And yet, how we in our respective religions are trained to look inward, are encouraged to build those walls and to affirm and assert the absoluteness of our positions.

You know, when a pastor does what I do to you, you are going to go out there and get slaughtered out in main street because every other church in town is telling their people this is it. This is true. You have it, everything else is wrong. Stand for it. Fight for it. Witness to it. And you're going to go out there and say, "Well, on the one hand, and on the other, and in the meantime..." You don't have a chance. A nice, civil, humane discussion like this disallows you to get out there and win the battle of the religious wars. But once we see that our religion, as well as all the others, is a human response to the Divine, we realize that, even if a revelation has come from beyond, it can only find expression in human language, human thought forms. It can only take shape in human community. There is no other way. And once you see that you're drained of your absolutism. You must be done with your exclusivism, and arrogance is simply impossible.

So, religion is a very normal, natural part of being human and the respective religions of the world are so many creative and imaginative constructs that seek to respond to that religious question. Someone suggested the image of a landscape that has many wells dug and some wells are just very simple and some

are very elaborate, but all of the wells tap in to that great underground river of life. And so it is with the religions.

Now, you may say, "Well, if all religions are the same..." (I didn't say that. I said all religions are attempting to do the same thing.) "... are true, then they are probably all false, and so why would anyone commit oneself to that which is not absolute and final?"

Because it is only in that total commitment of oneself to the practice and the observance of one's own faith story that one will come to that spiritual peace, insight, and healing which is salvation. You can't run on many roads at once. You can't ride all horses at the same time. And we've all been given a story anyway. Our story is a beautiful, magnificent story. We stand as recipients of a grand tradition. Our Judeo-Christian heritage reflected in the scriptures, having shaped Western civilization - what a grand tradition that is. And it is our story. It is an unusual person who can move over into another story and there experience the holy and the sacred. Some rare individuals have been able to do that, but not many of us. Most of us have been given a story and it is our story and it denigrates not in the least to say that it is our story, our authentic story, although it's not the only story. It is not the only well in the landscape. But, for us, it is the source of the water of life and that, not simply as an intellectual articulation of what is true, but rather, the experience in community of that which is reflective of the vision of our faith story.

With what shall I bow down before the most high? Shall I bring ten thousand offerings? Shall I bring the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? What shall I do?

And the prophet, speaking the word of God, says,

"I told you what you should do. Do justice. Love mercy. And walk humbly with your God."

God is experienced, not in some mystical flight, some esoteric vision in splendid isolation, but God is experienced in our story in the doing of justice and in the loving of mercy and in the humility before the Mystery that is God.

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said, "What is the summary of the law, but to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself?" Love.

When the lawyer wanted to push Jesus a little further, he said, "Who is my neighbor?" bringing it down to earth, so to speak. And then, very interestingly, what did Jesus say? "Your neighbor is the one you encounter in need. Your neighbor is not the one who lives in proximity to you or the one who shares community with you. Your neighbor is the one who crosses your path who is in need." And so, he tells the familiar, beautiful story of the Samaritan who reached

out to one who was of another kind, in his need, showing mercy and love and care.

What must I do to be saved? I used to know a whole bunch of scripture verses which I could tell you about what you have to believe, what words you should use, how to be saved. I found a little tract the other day again. Someone placed a tract in a very convenient place in the Men's Room, kind of like having a captive audience. Once again, it was very simple, just one, two, three, and bingo, salvation.

Nonsense. Salvation is in human encounter marked by justice, mercy and love. And the irony is that when Jesus would talk about gaining eternal life, or we could say encounter with God or experiencing the holy, Jesus didn't talk about anything this way at all. That's the marvel of it. That's the irony of it. God is experienced in the acts of justice and mercy and kindness and love to a concrete individual, human being. God is experienced in the horizontal relationships of life. God is experienced in human community. Compassion is the final test of every theology and of every religious expression. If religion is making us kind and true and loving and compassionate, it's good and it's true. If it leads to separation, hostility, judgment and damnation, it is false, according to Jesus. Now, that's our story.

So, what must you do to be saved, to inherit eternal life, to fulfill your human being? What do you make of it all? And how are you doing? It is not really such a mystery. Good religion warms the heart, opens the mind, and enables us to embrace our neighbor. The religious question is quite a bit simpler and more difficult than I ever dreamed.