

“True religion”

September 2007

Hymn Joyful, joyful we adore you VU 232

Scripture James 1:17-27

Verse 27, ‘religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this; to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, to keep oneself unstained from the world.’

Prayer Let us pray – Almighty God, our heavenly Father, you have made us for yourself and called us into your fellowship. Grant that today while we worship you, we may receive your blessing, and may be equipped to worship you, throughout another week and month and year, in word and in deed, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lesson Our lesson from James letter is an attempt to say what true religion is. What is at the core? What is the central mark of religion? First of all, says James, it comes from God. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” In Paul’s letter to the Galatians (5:22), God has given us through grace: love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, generosity, and faithfulness. These are spiritual gifts, given by God. Faith, which Paul says saves us, is a gift of God. James idea about what saves us is different from Paul in that James emphasizes good works; without acts of love and generosity and kindness, our religion is ethereal, of no practical value. “Faith without works is dead”, he says (2:7). But both Paul who says we are saved by faith, and James who says we are saved by practical good works, agree that it is through God’s grace that we have these gifts. Therefore we must not boast of our faith or of our good works; both come from our generous and loving God. His Spirit calls them forth, brings them out; they are both necessary, and a part of God’s saving plan. The argument that one is more essential than the other is a futile argument. We must have both; they are God’s gifts and we must not spurn one to uphold the other. Therefore let us have both.

We are saved by grace, by faith in Jesus Christ, who died for us; and by good works, in Jesus Christ, who commands that we do them. James says we must love the widow and the orphan and uphold them because they need our help. In other words – help the poor and disadvantaged. Jesus named them in His parable of the last judgment: the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison. If we help them we are “blessed”; we are welcomed in His kingdom. It is interesting to surmise that this James is none other than Jesus brother who was the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. When there was a famine in Judea around 48-51 A.D., Paul was spreading the gospel throughout Greece and taking up an offering in Philippi and Thessalonica for the hungry in Jerusalem. So we can conclude from all three, Jesus, James and Paul, that we must have this practical Christianity. And James went further to say that if you don’t have this as part of your religion; the rest is nothing, air, words, dead faith. The word of truth says you must have both faith and good works; works of healing, works of compassion and of forgiveness. His ministry was for the needy and disadvantaged, the outcast and the sinner. If you served them, you were serving Him. Love, respect and service to others, that is the essence of true religion. So says James, and his brother Jesus backs him up.

(Alternate ending)

Jesus said of His ministry (Luke 4:18-19), “The Spirit of the lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Discussion Are good works necessary?
 Are good works a danger to the Church?
 Paul and later Martin Luther had doubts about good works saving us.
 Luther called James “an epistle of straw”. Discuss.

Prayer Let us pray – Loving and gracious God, give us the gifts of faith and good works. Show us how to love and respect all people, and, with Christ to be “as one that serves”. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

This meditation is based on material prepared by Rev. Fraser Muldrew, Winnipeg, MB

Coming events Check for Men’s Fall Rallies and Roundups in your area this fall

Book of the month “Living Waters” by Tom Harpur

“Worthy of the Gospel”

September 2008

Hymn Jesus, stand among us VU 396

Scripture Philippians 1: 15-27

Verse 27 “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.”

Prayer Let us pray –Your ways, O God, surprise us, for your standards are not our own. We want quick results, while you work patiently for steady transformation. We seek to comprehend within narrow limits, but you come to us to broaden our horizons. We dare to worship what we cannot see because Christ has demonstrated that your love is real. Love us now into becoming all we are meant to be. Amen.

Lesson We’re coming to the end of summer. The world has just witnessed the Olympic Games from Beijing and has learned more about China and its people than we may have expected. We have also seen triumphs and defeats as athletes competed against each other and against the clock. Some things we saw or read about were heart-warming and others were heart-wrenching. Was this the “real world”?

While this has been going on we have also continued to witness violence, poverty and cruelty in Afghanistan, Georgia, Iraq, and Zimbabwe and even in Canada on our “reserves” and in our cities. Is this the world as it should be?

And now we move into the fall season with its “back to school”, its slowing down of the growth of plants, its planning and preparation for winter, and its elections within different levels of governments.

As I prepare this, the “Democrat” convention is taking place in Denver, Colorado. We are reminded of people such as Abe Lincoln, John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King who were far from perfect but whose lives were taken while they were trying to make their country a better and fairer place in which all people could live as equals, without fear.

I was taken by some things which Michele Obama noted in her speech from her life experiences, such as:

“you treat people with dignity and respect, even if you don’t know them, and even if you don’t agree with them.”;

“we also know what our world should look like.....we know what fairness and justice and opportunity look like.....(we need) to believe in ourselves -- to find the strength within ourselves to strive for the world as it should be.”;

“the young people serving our communities – teaching children, cleaning up neighbourhoods, caring for the least among us each and every day.”;

“all of us driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won’t do – that we have an obligation to fight for the world as it should be.”

To me these are good observations. I believe that we in AOTS, as for all those who serve Christ, have a continuing obligation to continue to serve wherever we

see a need. As Paul states in our gospel passage, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

There are many places we can serve to make this world a better place. Jesus Christ, our example, showed us many ways. As followers, “as one that serves”, let us too be examples to the world, even in our small corner. May our lives bring light that others might follow, not in our ways, but in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Discussion What’s wrong in the world?
 What’s wrong right here in our town?
 Is what we are doing worthy of the gospel of Christ?

Prayer Let us pray – O God, we know the gospel of Christ is ours for sharing. Help us to walk in the spirit, that we may lead worthy lives. Your Spirit strengthens us and fills us with joy. We seek to grow in faith and to help others to grow. Your harvest, O God, needs the labour of our hands. May our labours bear fruit for Christ. May our manner of life be worthy of the gospel. Amen.

**Coming events Check for Men’s Fall Rallies and Roundups in your area this fall
 Banff men’s conference 17 – 19 October**

Book of the month The Book of Job

“Why do you spend?”

Sept 2010

Hymn “Now thank we all our God” VU 236

Scripture Isaiah 55: 1-3a (New American Standard Bible)

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come; buy wine and milk, without money and without cost.

Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance.

Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, that you may live.

Prayer Let us pray – O God, you have provided for our every need; good food, shelter, knowledge, skill, friendship, affection. In our ignorance we often feel that these are our possessions by right, in our best moments we know that they are your gifts and behind all life’s wonders we find your very presence. For all of this we thank you. May we spend ourselves and our substance in striving for Christ’s goals. May we hunger and thirst after righteousness. So we would give of our time and our talent, our treasure and our toil in the name of Jesus. Amen

Lesson My wife, Helen, and I have just returned from a driving trip to Charleston South Carolina and back. The occasion was for the wedding of a nephew aboard a cruise ship. The ceremony was short but sweet and sufficient from a legal point of view.

Charleston is a beautiful old city with many fine old Christian churches. We were told that Charleston has more churches per capita than any other American city. We went on a carriage tour and a walking tour and observed the exterior of several of these buildings on Friday and Saturday. As we left Charleston for Myrtle Beach on Sunday morning we noted how full the church parking lots were for the many suburban churches of different denominations along the highways. That was good to see.

And then we came to a Wal-Mart where there were thousands of people “worshipping”. Not worshipping God, but worshipping “stuff”. “Why do you spend your money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” the author of Isaiah asks.

I am in the middle of a book called *Money Enough* by Douglas A. Hicks. He notes that this Isaiah biblical narrative declares that genuine satisfaction is more than instant gratification. It is more than happiness as an emotional feeling or as a fluctuating subjective state dependent on material goods. Why do we spend our money on stuff that doesn’t satisfy? Economists have reminded us that the endless pursuit of consumer goods will more likely place us in competition with our neighbours than provide any sense of enduring satisfaction. We will be chasing consumer happiness that remains just beyond our reach.

Hicks states that he has been reading about how much it would cost to provide basic education, clean drinking water, safe sewage, basic health care, and adequate nutrition for all people in the world. The best estimates for meeting all these basic need for everyone are on the order of \$200 billion per year. Note that the bailout for Wall Street institutions in October 2008 was \$700 billion.

I look forward to completing this book in which there may be more I wish to share in this column.

I will close with a short anecdote. In a large Canadian city a family from a wealthy area was told about a huge bargain food outlet where they could buy groceries for much less than in their own neighbourhood. They drove their van down to the food terminal. The customers weren't quite their kind of people, but the price was right. They loaded up with cases of canned goods and produce. On the way home the axle broke. Sounds like an update of one of Jesus' parables.

Discussion How much "stuff" do you need?

Prayer Let us pray – Our God, you have given us so much with your gift of life, yet we wish always for more. We push beyond the boundaries. May we be aware of how that striving creates burdens for those around us. We would pray for all who bear sorrows unseen yet heavy on the heart, those who feel an inner shame that needs the cleansing of your love and ours; those who are exploited for the satisfaction of others, especially for those whom they love. So may our prayers and reflections not be casual this day, but standing in the deep centre of our own needs grant us grace to stretch our hands of care to others in Jesus' name. Amen.

“Passion and encouragement”

September 2012

Hymn “How clear is our vocation, Lord” VU 504

How clear is our vocation, Lord, when once we heed your call;
to live according to your word, and daily learn, refreshed, restored,
that you are over all and will not let us fall.

Scripture *Romans 15: 1-6* (*The Message*)

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the needs of the people around us, asking ourselves, “How can I help?”

That’s exactly what Jesus did. He didn’t make it easy for himself by avoiding people’s troubles, but waded right in and helped out. “I took on the troubles of the troubled,” is the way the scripture puts it. Even if it was written in scripture long ago, you can be sure it’s written for us. God wants the combination of his steady constant calling and warm personal counsel in scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we’ll be a choir – not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!

Prayer Let us pray – Jesus Christ, our Saviour, alive and at large in the world, help us to follow and find you today in the places where we work and meet people, spend leisure time and make plans. Teach us to see through your eyes and to hear the questions you ask, by the power of the Cross, and in the freedom of your Spirit, we pray. Amen.
(from VU 564)

Lesson *You deserve the best. Look out for number one. Pamper yourself.* These are the watchwords of our age. But in this chapter Paul urges us to stop gazing at our own reflection. For the first time in Romans he holds up the example of Christ, the one who embodies all the qualities God desires in us.

“How can I help?” We need to consider what personal attitudes might hinder or help us to bear with those who falter. We need to use our strength in our faith to lend a hand, to serve, to look after the needs of others.

If we follow Christ’s example in this and other areas of our lives we will need to use our endurance, we will need encouragement from one another, and we will need the hope that comes from serving together.

Several years ago a man decided to lead his group into “fantasy baseball”. They were passionate about baseball and decided to adopt a local little league baseball field, part of a school property. Every Saturday morning they groomed the field, cutting the grass, chalking the lines and raking the sand. They wanted to impact the kids who came to practice or to play.

Then their care of the field drew the attention of neighbours and the school administration, but the most lasting impact was on the commissioner of the baseball league who was amazed that a group of men would consistently show up to work for free, without asking for anything in return.

Using the passion of the group for baseball, they were able to show Christ's love for a part of the community that wouldn't be reached through most of the regular serving opportunities. When we engage the passions of our group members, there is more enjoyment in serving and there is more likelihood that the work will have a positive impact and will continue. We are more likely to be "singing in harmony" when we engage our passion.

Remember, it's not how many members you have; it's the difference you make in the lives of the members you have, in your congregation, and in your community.

Discussion - What are the people in your group passionate about?
- How can your group use its passion to demonstrate the love of Christ to your community in a tangible way?

Prayer Let us pray – May we love and care for one another in Christ's name. May our God of grace shine upon each of us and cause us to grow. May God's living word give us the energy and nourishment that we need. And may the Holy Spirit produce in us the fruit that it seeks, both now and forevermore. Amen.

George Bishop – Spiritual Life Chair

Devotion for September 2014

Hymn: VU 439 vs 1-3 & 5

Scripture: James 5:4 and Luke 10:7

Reflection:

Nothing spells the end of summer in Canada like Labour Day. You know, in Canada it really started in 1872 when a group of workers in Toronto were protesting. Unions were outlawed at that time. Labour day has progressed from a protest to a celebration enjoyed by all, unions, workers, kids, house wives, retirees and even bosses. From various scriptures it appears labour at the time of Jesus and even in the old testament had no day of celebration. Jesus certainly recognized that, never advocated for a “Labour Day” celebration but simply preached, treat people equally, with respect, and pay them fairly for their efforts. He never advocated strikes nor formal protests, but ignored those laws that were unjust and unfair and urged people to live by his edict, love your neighbour.

Discussion

We should talk about how, if we lived by Jesus teaching would we need the labour movement. If our ancestors did so, would we have evolved into the adversarial system that labour and management enjoy today. The book may be old, but the common sense and teaching of Jesus will never grow old.

Hymn: VU 307

Prayer.

Lord, as one hymn says, “make me an instrument of your peace”, we pray that the day will come when we will truly love our neighbour and a labour day celebration will truly be a celebration every day.

.

Breathtaking

Devotion for Sept 2015

Hymn: VU #291 All things Bright and Beautiful

Scripture: 1 Isaiah 2:2 and Psalm 12:11

Reflection:

The scenery is awesome, even breathtaking, but only if you can take your eyes off the road to see it. If you want to hit the Arctic Circle by road in Canada, the Dempster highway in the Yukon is your only choice. On its way to the Arctic Circle it snakes through and around and up and down some truly breathtaking scenery while at the same time it is narrow, rough, loose gravel and has no concept that most roads actually have signage, a shoulder and even guard rails in places. Did I not have my sweaty palms glued to the wheel and my focus simply to stay on the road I probably would have enjoyed the scenery as well as my wife did. Seeing the tops of trees rising on one side of the road and nothing but distant peaks on the other did not phase her. I wished I had her confidence in my driving. You know the bible has a lot to say about mountains. Moses received the Ten Commandments on a mountain and in Mathew alone there are at least three mentions of events taking place on mountain tops. All told, I read that mountains get over 500 mentions in the bible. Supposedly mountains are a product of the heaving and roving rocks of the ice age, however someone or something was behind all that upheaval. Christians tend to think it was our God who pushed the button to get things moving and then left nature to rumble on and finish the job. Wow, what a job she did. It is really difficult to describe the unbelievable beauty and colour as one travels throughout our wonderful country.

Discussion:

Familiar with the Franke Lane hit, "Lord you gave me a mountain this time", intimating that a mountain is not just something to overcome but a huge obstacle in one's life? We all know they do take something to climb whether walking or driving, and that effort sometime ends in tragedy. Biblical history was born in a mountainous region and since they believed God lived up in heaven then being on a mountain top brought one closer to God. So, are our daily trials sometimes like climbing a mountain and could we reach the top without His help?

Hymn.. VU # 43 Go tell it on a Mountain

Prayer: Lord, we encounter mountains sometime in our daily lives and sometimes we even create them. We simply ask your assistance to help us reach the peak, climb to the summit and by overcoming our mountain we will be nearer to you. amen

“After the Lazy Summer”

Devotion for September 2016

Hymn: VU 223 Eternal, Unchanging, We sing

Scripture: Isaiah: 24 4-5 & Psalm: 24 1-2

Reflection:

Labour Day, first day of school, back to the normal routine, seems September spells all of that. It's as if a new life begins after the lazy summer. Did those events exist in Jesus time or was September just another month? Life then was not ruled by a calendar but by the season; planting, harvesting, storing and waiting for the next spring. In most countries the sun was the year and the moon was the guide for time. Man was ruled by nature not a calendar. Today, with all our gadgets and knowledge the more we seem to learn about nature, about the heavens and the world around us the more the questions pop up and the farther away the answers seem. To understand the mind of God is not for us. The mystery only deepens. September today is just another step on the endless journey and our calendar notwithstanding; we are still ruled by nature.

Discussion;

Do we realize how much God still really controls and shapes our lives through nature?

Hymn VU 300 God Whose Farm Is all Creation

Prayer; Lord, seems we have gone from living with nature to trying to control it and seems every step we take we just mess up more. Well Lord, I am not sure we have found the answer yet as our greed seems to get in the way to correcting the mess we have made so we need your help. Please show us the way, help our leaders make the right decisions to correct our mistakes so our children and grandchildren can live with the nature you provided for us. Amen

How's the Weather?

Devotion for September 2017

Hymn: VU 291 All Things Bright and Beautiful

Scripture: Exodus 9:24 and 2 Peter 2:17

Reflection:

Well, if one accepts that climate change is mostly man made then we have not treated God's creation properly. We had fall weather in July & unbelievable summer weather for a couple weeks in September. The southern hemisphere has been battered by hurricanes and earthquakes. Some would suggest this is God punishing us for our treatment of the planet. Hard to accept since we are all guilty but only a few are getting punished and only a few believe that God is vindictive and issues punishment for our actions. So what is going on? Is the weird weather part of God's long term plan and how much is mankind really responsible? I don't think scientist really know. If one does a lot of digging and reading it seems we do play a part in the changing weather, but only a small one.

Discussion:

Do you think God is responsible for the massive climate changes various parts of the world are experiencing and how much is mankind responsible?

Hymn: VU 530 All Beautiful March of Days

Prayer:

God, creator of all things, we are thankful for our beautiful home and ask your forgiveness if we have misused it. Please give us the knowledge, the strength and the will to undo any damage we have done. In Jesus name, amen

.