

August 29, 2021
Sermon manuscript

Piety That Works

This morning I want to talk about the religious practices and spiritual disciplines we keep. The fancy word for this is our 'piety'. Everyone who is religious has some form of piety. It could include attending Church, different habits of prayer - in morning and night, at meals, throughout the day, it could reading the Bible, giving an offering to the Church, some may regularly fast, all sorta different things. Every one of us who is religious has some piety - does something that is directed toward God, or perhaps at least that we *intend* to, or things we fail to do but think we should and therefore feel bad about.

Well, the good news I want to proclaim this morning is that Jesus desires to free us from living under the yoke of any practices that consistently fail to draw us near to Him or bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And Jesus wants to guide us instead into practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love. Lemme say this good news again: Jesus desires to free us from living under the yoke of any practices that fail to draw us near to Him or bear the fruit in our lives - no matter how pious they may seem - and He wants to lead us instead toward practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love.

I've been an Anglican for about fifteen years now. Amanda and I began attending an orthodox Episcopal Church during my first year in seminary down in southern California. And one of the things I really cherish about Anglicanism is the ancient approach to Sunday worship in the liturgy and weekly holy communion. However, one of the most well-known Anglican traditions is not it's Sunday liturgy, which is pretty similar to the Roman Catholics' and others, but the Daily Office, the two liturgies of Morning & Evening Prayer. If you're not familiar with them, you can find them on pages 11 and 41 in the Prayer Book. And Morning Prayer *can* be used as the primary service on Sunday mornings, as we've done a few times during the Pandemic. But Morning & Evening Prayer were especially designed to be done as a daily discipline of devotion.

They have been a mainstay of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer from the very first edition published in 1549. And Archbishop Cranmer crafted them by taking the liturgy used by monastics (by monks and nuns), which appointed 8 separate times of prayer throughout the 24 hour cycle of the day (including one they would wake for in the middle of the night), and compressing those down into the two offices of Morning & Evening Prayer, which Cranmer estimated were more realistic for the common person, who was not living in a monastery, to complete. So for almost 500 years now, the Daily Office of Morning & Evening Prayer has been not only a hallmark of Anglican spirituality, but the primary practice our tradition prescribes as a daily discipline. And it can be done corporately or alone, but it is meant to be a one-stop shop - or two-stop shop if one does both Morning and Evening - that covers all of the bases: confession, scripture, praise and thanksgiving in the canticles, and prayer.

Well, upon initially becoming an Anglican down in southern California I began trying to take up this practice of praying one or the other - morning or Evening Prayer - on most days. And initially I was thrilled at this new discovery. Not only was it new for me, but in some ways it provided some relief. You see, I had come to Anglicanism from the Evangelical Church, where there had been a very clear expectation that believers would do a "Quiet Time" with God everyday, which consisted of prayer and reading scripture. But despite having *tried* to be faithful in doing "quiet times", I had often felt some anxiety around them, too, for the simple reason that I was never sure when I was done, "When had I done enough?" Now for some of you who are more mature in the faith, you probably know that's a ridiculous question. But at that age my relationship with God was very performance-oriented. I was still in this mentality of trying to earn God's approval by being a good little boy. So I was always wondering when I had read and prayed enough? When I'd done it for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20, 30? Therefore one thing I liked about the Daily Office was that at least Morning & Evening Prayer had a defined ending, so I no longer had to *decide* when I was done, after the dismissal I could be free to go about my day.

Well, a few years later, when Amanda and I moved to Canada for me to finish my Master of Divinity at an Anglican seminary - Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto - Morning & Evening Prayer was the form their daily chapel followed. And Divinity students were expected to participate in at least one of the two every day, so I tried my best to comply. But I have to be honest that after the newness of that wore off, I realized I was beginning to find this liturgical form of daily worship - where 3 scriptures read without any explanation or comment and singing is replaced with canticles - not all that life-giving, even onerous. I *often* found myself zoning out; and I

frequently left feeling worse than I had coming in; less connected to God, perhaps even angry about the whole thing. And this was, of course, in contrast to many of my classmates who seemed to *just be loving it* and finding it so edifying and fruitful.

So over time I began attending or doing the Daily Office begrudgingly, or skipping it altogether; but when I would do that I would feel a fair bit of guilt: like I was sort of on God's naughty list or something, like he's some sort of cosmic Santa Claus? So I was stuck between going it & struggling or not going and feeling like God was mad at me.

But the good news that I was failing to appreciate is that as much as I may have felt at times like I was on God's naughty list, I was not. Because God doesn't work like Santa Claus. You see, the lie of being performance-oriented Christians ignores the *truth* - the Gospel - that for followers of Jesus our confidence before God is based solely in what Jesus did in His life, death and resurrection; in His performance, not our own. So in regard to whether or not we do some spiritual discipline on any given day, the way God feels toward us and about us, is *NEVER* hanging in the balance. So, if there is any purpose in any of the spiritual disciplines we keep, staying on God's good side can't be it.

Jesus desires to free us from living under a yoke of any practices that (we may be doing out of obligation but) are **not bearing fruit**. And Jesus wants to redirect us into practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love.

And support for this good news can be found in our Gospel passage today from Mark 7. This chapter opens with Jesus still in Capernaum, where he's been in our Gospel passages the past few weeks from John 6. But verse 1 says there were some Pharisees there - these were the Jewish religious leaders, the chief pastors - along with some scribes from Jerusalem who were learned in the Holy Scriptures. And by this point neither the Pharisees or scribes are fans of Jesus; and they would love nothing more than to discredit him in front of people.

So verse 2 says they "saw that some of (Jesus') disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed." And Mark explains that this would've gotten the attention of Jesus's opponents because in those days the Pharisees would "not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing." Now, let's be clear: this hand-washing wasn't about protection from germs. The idea was that when people had been in the public marketplace - around all of the people there - it was like the sinfulness of the people would rub off on them. And so this ceremonial process of washing of their hands was symbolic for that uncleanness being washed away and remaining okay with God. Although it was not required by any scripture in the Old Testament, the people believed they needed to do this ritual of hand-washing to remain on God's good side. And over time the same practice became expected to be done to cups and pots and even furniture that for any reason was thought to have been unclean. So as the generations passed, more and more of these scrupulous traditions had been added and the Pharisees taught they were all necessary for faithful Jews to keep.

So they confront Jesus about this. In verse 5 they ask him, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" And what will become clear that Jesus hasn't instructed his disciples to do this because he knows it's not necessary. But instead of saying that directly, he quotes a scripture from Isaiah. In verse 6 Jesus replies,

"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'

Then he says, "**8** You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

So here, Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees, but he also reveals that the purpose should be of any spiritual practice we keep. Whether its going to worship, prayers, going to Church, whatever: the purpose should be to keep our hearts near to God and to help us live according to His commands: to love God and our neighbor.

But the *Pharisees'* piety was failing to do either. Despite this hand washing ritual and all their other practices they scrupulously kept, with the Isaiah passage Jesus is suggesting their hearts are FAR from the heart of God. And, of course we know it isn't gonna bear the fruit of love in them, cuz these are the same folks who end up conspiring to have Jesus put to death!!! ¹

¹ On verses 9-13... ⁹ And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe[c] your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,'[d] and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'[e] ¹¹ But you say that if anyone

So Jesus turns to his disciples and the crowd and explains it to them. He says, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.” This is verse 15, he says, “Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” He’s saying what God wants is our hearts and what He cares about is our character. And any religious or spiritual value of any practice we put energy into should be measured by that, and the spiritual disciplines that don’t do that should be cast aside. #

Now I NEED TO BE REALLY CLEAR that there is a big difference between this hand-washing ritual in Mark 7 and the Daily Office - Morning & Evening Prayer - I was struggling with in seminary. Jesus seems to indicate that the hand-washing practice was useless for everybody. Whereas I know tons - hundreds of people - plenty of them sitting here, who *do* find Morning & Evening Prayer fruitful. It’s just I wasn’t one of them.

So there eventually came a time when I recognized that I needed to cast aside the Daily Office of Morning & Evening Prayer, because it wasn’t bearing good fruit in my life. Now notice I’m talking about fruit, not feeling. We will all have occasions where we don’t *feel* like doing something, especially a discipline we’ve committed to; so it can be important to give ample time to make sure the issue is fruit, not just feeling. But after I left seminary - I had given it quite a few years, and in that time and the coming years I found there were some other disciplines I found much more life-giving - so turned to practices that much more consistently got me to a place of rest in God and better finally equipped me to love my neighbors as myself. Things like writing prayers in a journal; reading books about God’s word or scripture with a commentary that drew on the wisdom of the Church, instead of just bringing my own understanding to scripture; going for regular runs; going to therapy.

You know we need to understand that not everything that contributes to our spiritual well-being even has to necessarily be religious. God created us with bodies, so caring for our bodies can contribute to being in a better mindset able to love and care for others. God created us with emotions and for relationships, so having a season in therapy - or a whole lifetime if necessary - if it helps us get to a place of better emotional health and to approach our relationships (with humans and God) with better health, in some instances that may do more to help us be at rest in God and able to love that reading our Bibles all day would!²

So I said “sayonara” to the obligation of Morning & Evening Prayer that my tradition had put on me.

You see, one thing that I think the old tradition imposed by Cranmer failed to appreciate is the concept of temperament. In the centuries since Cranmer, a lot of insights have emerged in regard to people having not just different temperaments, but different spiritual temperaments - and I did a Lenten workshop on this about seven years ago - which suggest that any spiritual practice or approach to devotion is going to be more effective for some than others. Not to mention those who have legit baggage - I think about all the people who’ve been spiritually abused with scripture at some point but are in the evangelical tradition that demands they read their bible every day - talk about piling abuse upon abuse! Well, needless to say, none of this was on Cranmer’s radar in the 16th century.

But even in addition to temperament and baggage, there is also the reality that people go through changes and stages in their lives where different approaches for spiritual practices - and expectations of time one can put toward it - are only sensible. And to that point, there could come a time in my life where the Daily Office is precisely what I need - there may not, but there could.

declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— 12 then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Without getting into the weeds too much, in first century Israel there was no social security, no pensions, no 401ks, so it was more common in those days that as people aged they would need their children to support them. But apparently there were reports of greedy sons invoking a religious tradition known as Corban on their property, which meant they had dedicated it to God. Now, this didn’t mean they were giving it to the temple, they would still keep the property to enjoy themselves. But they were twisting one religious law to get out of another, namely the fifth commandment to honor their father and mother. And perhaps some of these Pharisees had done this or taught that it was technically permissible.

And so Jesus is pointing out that these scrupulous religious practices the Pharisees were keeping so faithfully were 1) failing to keep them near to God, 2) and there attention to them was actually a distraction from keeping the commandments that God cared about: to act justly and love mercy (toward their fellow man). So no, he wasn’t gonna instruct his disciples to do it.

² Here I would suggest something akin to the 16th century regulative vs normative controversy in worship. The puritan position on worship was governed by the regulative principle, which held that “God commands churches to conduct public services of worship using certain distinct elements affirmatively found in scripture, and conversely, that God prohibits any and all other practices in public worship.” Anglicans like Richard Hooker took the position of the “normative principle”, “which teaches that whatever is not prohibited in scripture is permitted in worship, as long as it is agreeable to the peace and unity of the Church.”

So this morning I want to proclaim that Jesus desires to free us from living under the yoke of any practices that consistently fail to draw us near to Him or bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And Jesus wants to instead guide us into practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love.

And I wonder if any of you this morning have a spiritual practice or practices that hangs over your head - but that is an obligation put there by men and not by God. And one sign of this, in my opinion, would be if you 1) feel guilty when you don't do it, but 2) when you do manage *to do it* the fruit isn't there either. Now for many of you it won't be Morning or Evening Prayer, it could be anything. But perhaps somewhere along the line you were told: every good christian SHOULD do this, must read their bible every day, or better fast on this day or that. Well, maybe it's time to stand with Jesus and say "enough of that yoke". Because He desires to free us from living under the yoke of any practices that consistently fail to draw us near to Him or bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And then ask him to guide us into a practice, or practices - but it doesn't have to be a lot - that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love. When you think about your own spiritual life from the standpoint of the freedom you feel - which image from our scripture today matches - is it the freedom of disciples or the onerous burdens heaped up on those led by the Pharisees?

What if we allow Jesus' voice to be more dominant than that of man and allow him to lead us into what He has. I'm not proposing a 'build-your-own-spirituality', or that we shouldn't consult with other human beings - by all means, be accountable, guard against self-deception. But it is about re-building our spiritual lives with Jesus on practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love. ...And that are not about performance. A sign of health around spiritual disciplines is our mentality becomes less about "I better do this," or "I should do this" we say something more like, "God loves me no matter what, but I think Jesus is inviting me to do X - or to even make a habit of it. And I think this could be a blessing to me and others. So I'm gonn say 'yes' to him!" See how different that is? It's like the difference between a root canal and a marriage proposal.

Jesus desires to free us from living under the yoke of any practices that fail to draw us near to Him or bear the fruit in our lives - no matter how pious they may seem - and He wants to lead us instead toward practices that enable us to rest in God and that empower us for love.

Will you respond in prayer with me?

Lord Jesus, The traditions of the Church can be such a gift. We all rely on this great tradition, whether we realize it or not, to even understand your Gospel at all. But Lord, you have also made us for relationship with you. Through the gift of your son you are always accessible and waiting for us, like that father of the prodigal Son, delighting when we turn to you. And through your gift of the Holy Spirit, you are with us even now, desiring for us to know your presence and to help us along in this journey of life we are on. Lord, would you begin to show us how best we can come to a place of resting in you each day and being strengthened by your Holy Spirit to keep your commands?

God, show us where we have listened to voices telling us we must do something that are not your voice, that lead us to a place of self-condemnation.

If you know a better way for us, guide us into that truth.

Help us live in freedom with you.

In your son's name we pray, Amen.