

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA *July 10, 2022*

Beware of Religion!

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Richard Rohr argues that the bible may be the only religious work that contains a warning against religion right in its beginning. He interprets the whole business of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to be this warning. He explains his thinking thus:

“We read the story of humanity’s original sin in Genesis. There Yahweh says, “Don’t eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17). Now why would that be a sin? It sounds like a good thing, doesn’t it? We were actually trained to think that way.

In the seminary we took serious courses on “moral theology” to help us rightly discern who was good and who was bad. Unfortunately, this usually only emboldened the very judgmental mind that Jesus warned us against (see Matthew 7:1-2). Some then thought that this was the whole meaning of Christianity—religion’s purpose was to monitor and police society in regard to its morals. Religion became all about morality instead of being a result and corollary of Divine Encounter. As such, this was much more a search for control or righteousness than it was a search for truth, love, or God. It had to do with the ego’s need for certitude, superiority, and order. Is that what Jesus came for? Jesus never said, “You must be right,” or much less, “You must be sure you are good and right.” Instead he said, “You must love one another.” His agenda is about growing in faith, hope, and love while always knowing that “God alone is good.”

I guess God knew that dualistic thinking would be the direction religion would take. So the Bible says right at the beginning, “Don’t do it!” The word of God is trying to keep us from religion’s constant temptation and failure—a demand for certitude, an undue need for perfect explanation, resolution, and answers, which is, by the way, the exact opposite of faith. Such dualistic thinking (preferring a false either/or to an always complex reality) tends to create

arrogant and smug people instead of humble and loving people. Too much “eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” might just be the major sin of all religion—especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Bible’s first warning has consistently been ignored.”¹

Phew, that was a lot from Brother Richard! I don’t usually like to include such a large section of a text as a quote in my sermons, but I find his argument quite compelling; and I think it has bearing on our text for today as well. I do not think it is unintentional on the part of Christ that those who fail to live out the two great commands in our parable today are both important members of the religious system of the time. It has been my experience, like it seems to have been Brother Richard’s, and even Christ’s own experience too; that religion can quickly turn into a tool of moralism and judgement. A way of avoiding how faith actually calls us to live.

And remember the setup to this parable! A lawyer is seeking to test or trap Jesus by asking about eternal life. Jesus does a marvelous job of getting the lawyer to answer his own question, but then the lawyer asks another. And what’s the motivation behind this second question? The text explains his motivation plainly (a rather rare occurrence in the Gospels): he is seeking to “justify himself.”² He’s asking at what point in loving his neighbor he can draw the line and say that he has acted “good enough” to earn eternal life. This whole thought process is rooted in dualistic thinking. Either he follows the Law and earns heaven, or he doesn’t and then he earns oblivion. Such self-justification requires judgement of the self, which all too often becomes judgement of others!

No wonder Jesus takes a veiled swipe at religion in the parable itself! The lawyer has fallen prey to what is perhaps the most common trap of religion, self-justification. And what does self-justification rely upon? Moralism and judgement! Or, as Brother Richard argued, self-justification comes from eating too much of the fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” That most tempting of fruits!

I have alluded to this propensity of humanity in the past. We are experts at taking good gifts from God and twisting them into weapons with which we can oppress and marginalize others. We certainly do this with the Law. God has given us this great gift, intended to structure our lives and communities in

¹ Richard Rohr, from [Daily Meditation](#), August 31, 2014. Adapted from *Things hidden: Scripture as spirituality*. 2007. Franciscan Media., pp. 37-39

² Luke 10:29a (NRSV)

healthy ways, and we've turned it into a cudgel with which we can beat others down by judging them in order to feel superior to them.

God attempts to short circuit this propensity by boiling the entirety of the Law down into the two great commands: love God and love your neighbor. The response of the lawyer though, proves that we can twist even this simple-seeming expression of God's commands. We can twist even the command to love into a weapon of religious oppression.

Unfortunately, too many Christians today are falling into this trap. Segments of the church are seeking to impose a moralistic and judgmental view of faith upon the entire country in ways that will not only lead to oppression and violence, but even to death! Whenever our religion leads us to ignoring suffering, or worse yet, causing suffering; we can be certain that we have wandered far from the Way of Christ, far from the Gospel.

Let me be plain, I am gravely concerned by what I see as the rise of Christian Nationalism in America. Christian Nationalism is the result of a legalistic, moralistic, judgmental religion. Such religions are dualistic in nature and **must** have both in-groups and out-groups; usually those who act acceptably according to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and those who do not. This is heresy of the most subtle and evil sort. Jewish Nationalism in the time of Christ led the Israelites to judge the Samaritans as unclean and unacceptable because they did not worship correctly. And here is Jesus making a member of that out-group into a paragon of keeping God's commands! Given the setup to the parable, this Samaritan is more worthy of inheriting eternal life than the priest and the Levite!

Beware of such religions! Even if they are disguised as Christian! To walk the Way of Christ means letting go of our desire to judge others. It means letting go of moralism and pursuing love instead. And it certainly means seeing no one else as "other," "unclean," or "unacceptable." Rather, walking the Way of Christ means seeing the very face of Christ in all whom we encounter. It means knowing to look for a divine encounter within the space of loving relationships. It means understanding that faith leads to love, never judgement.

It is incumbent upon followers of the Way of Christ to call out the evils of such dualistic religions. Christ denounced it because he knows it leads to terrible evil and sin. And calling out such evil out beings with ourselves. A classic question often asked regarding this parable is: who would you be offended to

hear as the hero in this narrative? Who do you despise as much as the Israelites despised the Samaritans? Russians? Communists? Hippies? The unemployed? Conservatives? Progressives? People of color? Transgender people? The necessary work to follow this question up is to try to see in that despised person the face of Christ and then to try and love them. This is the whole of the Way. So let go of judgements. Let go of dualistic thinking. Let go of evil religions. And follow the Way of Christ, the Way of Love.

Amen.