

February 27, 2011

Epiphany 8

1 Cor. 4:1-5

Matthew 6:24-34

Ps. 131

What does it mean to be religious?

Last week we read the passage right before this morning's passage, Paul writing to the Corinthian Christians with advice that they should become foolish in order to become wise; for the wisdom of the world is folly to God...and then goes onto the grandest of statements: For all things are yours, whether Paul or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:18-23).

"Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

What does it mean to be "stewards of the mysteries of God"? Again, what does it mean to be religious?

Religion, whose root is *religio*, means to rebind. Rebind what?

In Paul's young church in Corinth, people were divided, by class and prestige, by whom they chose as their mentor (Paul, or Peter, or Apollos, an Alexandrine Jew who continued to build the church in Corinth after Paul left, and whose eloquence had impressed many people). The Corinthian church included slaves and slave-owners; some people were coming to the communion service and treating it like a banquet, eating and drinking and leaving nothing left over. Others had the gift of speaking in tongues, and they minimized others' gifts; some people were more educated and felt a false sense of superiority; some Christians had brought lawsuits against fellow believers. Against all of these divisions, Paul spoke of equality of Christians as one body, and of a task, a role, an attitude: being stewards of the mysteries of God.

One of the problems in religion today (and true through history), which engenders conflict, not understanding, is based on the idea that religion is about right belief. The problem with this attitude is that it creates division; if I am taught that beliefs have ultimate legitimacy, then you must be wrong in order for me to be right.

The idea that religion is almost exclusively about intellectual, or conceptual, belief not only divides people but turns others away altogether. Some people who question the value of religion know this fact: that the world is more complex than what can be captured in right beliefs; they may see groups of Christians condemning others for their views, or unwilling to learn from human inquiry, such as science, or being self-righteous; for those skeptics about religions, seeing little to the contrary, real life seems to exist outside religious circles and church institutions. "That is often because religion has presented itself as a kind of fortress behind whose walls there is damage and even abuse done to people. Outsiders see religion as insistent on its own prerogatives and rules, something brittle and judgmental." (The Rev. Bill Tully, pastor at St. Bartholemew's Episcopal Church, NYC)

But, perhaps it's the very understanding, the definition of religion, that has gotten so many off track.

Historian of religions Karen Armstrong, in her popular book, *The Case for God*, argues for a different view of religion, and I think that Lutherans would agree with her when we consider Luther's understanding of what faith really is.

She refers to the story of Jesus and the father, whose son is sick with what today we might call epilepsy or seizures. The father asks Jesus whether he can do anything. Jesus answers: "All things are possible to him who believes," and the father responds with the words, "I believe, Lord, help thou my unbelief." (Mark 9:24-5) And Jesus heals the child.

Now, what does belief mean in that story? We take our clue to an answer from the gospels. Jesus himself was not so much asking people to believe in his divinity, because he did not make that claim for himself. Rather, he asked for their trust and loyalty, for engagement, commitment. He wanted them to be part of his mission: to give to the poor, feed the hungry, help and trust in his healing ministry, abandon their pride and self-importance, and trust in God, their Father. He wanted them to create a completely open and hospitable community by living in God's Kingdom to which everyone was invited. In that way, it seems, they would become stewards of God's mysteries. He wanted them to give their lives to him. "He modeled a way of living that at the gut level was unashamedly in awe of God, at the human level was not afraid to struggle for understanding, and at a practical level was about a maturity that makes love, giving and commitment possible." (Tully)

We now think of belief as the intellectual assent to a belief proposition "do you believe that Jesus is the savior, who can heal?"

Why? Dr. Armstrong peels away the layers of the derivation of this English word *belief*.

The Greek word *pistis*, translated as faith, means trust and loyalty; and that's what it means in the Gospels. But when the New Testament was translated from the Greek into Latin by Saint Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, *pistis* became *fides* (loyalty), but *fides* had no verbal form, so Jerome used the Latin verb *credo*, derived from *cor do* "I give my heart." So far, so good. When translated into the English King James version in 1611, *credo* became "I believe." So, for Luther belief meant faith, which meant trust, ultimate trust in God. Still, OK. But during the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth century, belief became an intellectual assent. (Armstrong, p. 87)

And that has led to many troubles and conflicts; between people who came to view scientific understanding and religion as a conflict between ideas, whether it came to miracles or the age of the earth. It caused many thinking people to give up religious belief, and religious people to question whether they should think. It has even led to the divide between being religious or spiritual; with "religious" meaning adoption of beliefs that are questioned by reasoning people, and "spiritual" meaning the experience of something wider than self.

Further, she notes that Scripture through the ages until recently was never interpreted literally, but people knew it had many meanings, metaphoric, spiritual, and allegorical.

A leadership seminar recently asks participants the questions: Who are you? And What's your story? These are great questions to ask of people in the church: We are more than what we think. As stewards of the mysteries of God (knowledge of Jesus and how he lived and knowledge of creation as God's gift) we must be trustworthy and humble. The claims of Jesus' life and teachings take us beyond our reasoning powers to where we can go no further, to unlearning old habits and ways of being and becoming new people. That is who we are and that is our story.

All the church's sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, prayer and confessions are meant to assist us in changing our lives. But we miss their meaning if we don't realize that we need to change, to go beyond what we think, so that we see the world with openness, to live compassionately, trustworthily.

Certainly feeling astonishment, and awe, and compassion are needed for stewards of God's mysteries.

We are stewards by *doing* stewardship, becoming careful protectors of all God's good gifts, seeing how Jesus was a steward of the whole world, animals, plants, people, and life, following him.

Such grand gifts can be protected, stewarded by a certain attitude. So Jesus asks us to focus where focus is needed. Anxiety is symptomatic of putting ultimate worth on partial goods (clothing, eating, and drinking); and not on the first and final good, the mysteries of God.

To cultivate a receptive, humble, listening attitude, to the mystery that draws us in love requires work and growth, is why spiritual disciplines are part of religion. These disciplines include prayer, meditation (Ps. 131: "I still my soul and make it quiet), yoga, ritual, following the Golden Rule day by day, attending a church community, being loving in relationships, seeing how God's kingdom is alive in the world and fostering its growth.

Truly religious people, Karen Armstrong writes, "want lives overflowing with significance. They have always desired to integrate with their daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that came to them in dreams, in their contemplation of nature, and in their intercourse with one another and with the [animal] world. (p. 399)

What is being religious? It is consciously rebinding oneself to the God of the living and loving, so that we can help rebind God's now fragmented world.