

Year B, Proper 17
September 2, 2018
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Today there is a symbiosis between the Epistle from James and the reading from Mark's Gospel. In James we are given a concrete example of the fruits of religion whereas in Mark we see the results of a disembodied faith. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of disconnecting ritual practice from compassion. In a "connect-the-dots" sort of fashion, James defines religious action by acts of love bestowed upon the most vulnerable. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Ritual practice does not exist to create obedience to a religious institution. Such practice, such religion, is designed to change our hearts as a precursor to charitable action.

Unfortunately the world continues to be filled with religious shysters. You remember well last spring's attention to Jesse Duplantis and his quest for a multimillion dollar plane. This time last year as Houston was suffering from flooding, Joel Olstein was rightly criticized for keeping his large church closed off from people in need of basic shelter. They serve as modern day examples of religious authorities against whom Jesus spoke. But it's not enough for us to dust off our hands, cross our arms, and consider our work done. Of course we like to think that *we*, if we had the capacity of Duplantis or Olstein, would behave differently if we had such resources at our disposal, but would we really?

The truth is we would likely continue to behave exactly as we behave now, however that may be, except it would likely be magnified. So as enticing as it is to cast judgment on these two preachers for profit, we cannot stop there. We must also examine our own actions or inactions and question our own motives. Do we act out of blind religious practice as an act of obedience to the institution that we call church? Sadly we are witnessing the fruits of blind allegiance to an institution right now with the sex abuse scandal and cover-up. Thousands of people have had their lives turned upside down by those preying on the most vulnerable rather than serving them. Religious practices that we have learned and practiced in the church are meant to crack open our hearts open to God's compassion.

If you've ever been ministered to in such a compassionate mechanism, you will never forget it. Back in 1992, our family was dealt a major tragedy with the unexpected death of my father. Obviously we were reeling in those first few days as we mourned but also made preparations for his funeral and burial. As the priest sat in our living room walking us through the steps, there was a knock at the door. Through the double doors of glass, we could see that it was Sheila from the church. Sheila was one of those ever-present, ever-faithful women of the church, indefatigable in religious practice *and* compassionate action. As my mother opened the door, Sheila never crossed the threshold, she simply took my mother's hands and told her, "I'm not going to stay but I just had to come and tell you how sorry I am for your loss and to assure you of my love." With that she nodded and began to make her way back home. I tell this story, not just for its obvious example of kindness in a time of need, but for me, it was a concrete

example of the direct connection between ritual practice and compassionate action. It was obvious that a life of prayer was a precursor to loving action.

I want to encourage you to reflect on these things in your own life. What is the correlation between what goes on in corporate worship and your life Monday through Saturday? When was a time when you prayed earnestly for clarity and then responded with a concrete action of compassion? And how did that action turn out? Write about these things. Sit with them awhile.

Scripture tells us again and again two things- that we cannot take the material world with us into the spiritual realm and that the way we behave here has some impact on the next realm. This little story captures this sentiment beautifully and gets to the heart of the dialogue between today's readings of Mark and James.

Once there was a very rich man who dreamed he died and went to heaven. St. Peter escorted him down a lovely street on which each house was magnificent. The rich man saw one house that was especially beautiful and asked who lived there.

St. Peter replied, "That is the celestial home of your butler."

"Well," said the man, smiling, "if my butler gets a place like that, I certainly look forward to seeing what *my* new home will be like."

Soon they came to a narrow street where the houses were tiny and unpretentious. "You will live there," said St. Peter, pointing to a small hut.

"Me, live in that hovel?" exclaimed the outraged man.

"This is the best we can do for you," explained Peter. "You must understand that we only build your home up here based upon the amount of compassionate love you showed back on earth."ⁱ

ⁱ *Synthesis*, September 2, 2018, page 4.