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Luke 9:57-62

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TRUE RELIGION

"Go and preach the kingdom of God."

- Luke 9:60

The Christian Church in the United States is today big business. It is the source of employment and income for over a half million people. It is one of the wealthiest businesses and one of the largest property owners in the nation. Even if it did not try, which it indeed does, it would nevertheless have a substantial influence on social and political affairs. The church as an institution plays a major role in our national life. Social scientists, politicians, economists, and business men in general cannot afford to ignore it.

The church we are speaking of, of course, is the church as a vast organization and institution. It no doubt sounds rather remote from that little, white, country church which you may have attended as a child, whose roof always leaked, whose budget was never balanced, and which had a janitor, a secretary, and business administrator all rolled into one -- the minister, who stayed a couple of years and then moved on to bigger things.

No, the church as a giant institution, and the church as a fellowship of workers and worshippers, are certainly two different things. The former is often criticized because it is too much like a corporation. The latter is often attacked for not being more business-like in its methods and operations.

Both definitions of the church describe a human institution whose purpose it is to preserve and propagate the basic principles of the Christian religion. How successful the church may be in its task is debatable, but it is not debatable that some kind of fellowship is necessary if Christianity is to survive as an effective force for good in our national life. Personally, I am convinced that religion could survive and flourish without the vast ecclesiastical structure which marks much of it today and which not infrequently has impeded the work of the Holy Spirit and thwarted the will of God. It was this kind of church that made Luther go underground and forced Galileo to retract his honest conviction that the earth was not the center of the universe. It is this kind of church which tries, unwisely in my opinion, to lobby for every conceivable kind of legislation and presumes to speak *ex cathedra* on matters as diverse as the admission of China to the U.N., and the closing hours of the local tavern.

The church was meant to be an instrument, a means which men could use to promote the Christian religion. True religion is something far greater than the church -- it is a particular relationship which exists between one man and God. From this relationship there then spring many consequences.

II

The Bible, to my knowledge, contains only one attempt to define religion, and the definition is more meaningful in what it does not say than in what it does say. It is contained in the New Testament Letter of James -- that book which Luther called an "epistle of straw" because he failed to understand it. James gave us this definition of religion:

"True religion and undefiled before God is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and keep oneself unspotted from the world."

I submit that it is a rather unsatisfactory definition, but let us see what James does not say. He does not say, "Religion which is pure and undefiled is membership in a church -- any church." He does not say, "Pure religion is to be baptized by immersion, or to accept one particular interpretation of the Scriptures, or to accept a particular creed, or to believe in certain dogmas." He does not say, "True religion is the formation of a strong lobby to prevail upon Caesar to get the Romans out of Jerusalem." For James none of these things was true religion. True religion was the manifestation of faith within an individual revealing itself in right attitude and right action. And it was purely individual. When one had a right relationship with God it would culminate in an improved relationship with other individual. When one had discovered God's kingdom, he would no longer seek the satisfactions of any lesser kingdom.

Such was James' understanding of religion. He gave religion a very practical meaning, and Martin Luther notwithstanding, James truly understood the mind of Christ.

III

Let me attempt to establish my point by referring to the words of Jesus which were contained in our Scripture Reading this morning.

When Jesus began his ministry he looked for some men who would follow him and help spread the good news -- the Gospel of God's goodness and mercy. He picked up a James and a John here, and a Simon and Andrew there, and was ever on the lookout for other promising disciples. One day as he and some of his friends were walking down the road they were approached by several men who said, "Lord, we will follow you wherever you go." All of them, however, had some little reservation and wanted to postpone the actual commitment to a later time. They put in that little three letter word that has caused so many people to lose the kingdom of God: "I will follow you wherever you go, but --" Then they gave some very plausible reasons why they couldn't do it right now. One had to go to a funeral, the other had to say good-bye to his relatives. "What better excuses could a man find?"

But Jesus rejected these excuses, not because he was harsh and had not feeling for the common amenities of life, but because these men failed to put first things first. What is more important to any man than the discovery of a right relationship between himself and God? This is the very meaning of the word religion--religio, the tie that binds man to the Eternal. Is there anything man could wish for more desirable than that? Is there anything more wonderful to know than to know that one is in God's care and concern forever? Is anything more important than to know that you abide in the love of God and therefore you never again need be afraid?

And so Jesus said to these men, "Your excuses will not do. Go and preach the kingdom of God." And so we finally come to the point of this whole sermon, for this is my theme: "True religion is that understanding of God's love which compels men to go and preach the kingdom of God -- preaching not only by word but by example as well." Without this no man is religious though he knows the Bible by heart, prays from morning until night, and hasn't missed a Sunday in church for 50 years. To know the love of God and to preach his kingdom, this is true religion.

I am afraid my own sons often feel the way one minister's son felt one day after his father had given him some good advice. "Do you really mean that, Dad?" he asked, "or are you just preaching?" When we are not really committed to a principle what we say about it seldom has any substance. A commitment has substance only when it is revealed in the way a person lives.

Let me illustrate with another story, this one about the late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. A London charwoman was talking a priest who met her in the inner temple where she was scrubbing the stairs. "Do you know the Archbishop of Canterbury?" she asked. "Yes, I do" he answered. "Well, do you know" said the charwoman, "he came here the other day and he asked me how I was because he said I didn't look happy. And I told him I couldn't be happy with two sons in a prison camp in Germany, the old man not able to work and me having to do for him, and not having much to live on. And do you know what his Grace did? He sat down on that step there and he talked to me for half an hour about the love of God."

It wasn't what the Archbishop of Canterbury said about the love of God that strengthened that London charwoman, it was the love of God that revealed itself within the Archbishop of Canterbury who would sit on a step for half an hour and talk to her about the love of God.

True religion means to know the love of God, to experience the love of God, to express the love of God. Is this not the reason that Jesus was the most truly religious man who ever lived? When men came to know him they came to know something about the love of God which they had never known before. If you and I are truly Christians it means that that same love of God must express itself through our lives, both in what we say and what we are. Christ still says to us, his modern disciples, "Go and preach the kingdom of God."

IV

The greatest evil which exists in our country today is not the growing crime rate as indicated recently in statistics issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

It is not in our divorce rate, our crime rate, our alcoholism rate, terrible evils that these things are. The greatest evil in our nation today is that so many men and women have chosen the wrong goal for their lives. The goal which they have chosen is comfort and they believe that any means justifies the attainment of comfort. That is why we have increasing crime, alcoholism, divorce, and all the rest.

It is a false goal and a false god. Some years ago in the city of Pamplona, Spain, the magistrate in the city court house discovered that 14 copper lightning rods which had been installed on top of the court house to safeguard it during the perennial thunder storms had been stolen, sold on the black market and replaced by some painted wooden poles. For several years the people had been putting their trust in lightning rods that were a cheap imitation of the real thing and could save them from nothing.

I need not point out the moral. There is only one thing that can save man, and that is a right relationship with the God who made him. To discover that relationship and to share it with others is the essence of true religion.