

## **There is great moral danger in the practice of religion.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

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There is great moral danger in the practice of religion. —Yes, you heard me right. I said, “There’s great moral danger in the practice of religion.” Jesus was very much aware of that danger, which is why, when we read the gospels, we see Jesus being hardest on the “religious” people, the self-consciously pious people, the ones who patted each other on the back because they kept all the outward observances of the Law. These were the people who had memorized all the prayers and could recite all the psalms, who never missed going up to the Temple for the feast days, and who made a great show of being devoted to God—but whose day-to-day lives were inconsistent with their profession. Do you remember what Jesus called those people? Yes, he called them hypocrites.

Religion is a very good thing. But the danger in religion is that it’s easy to settle for “keeping up appearances”. It’s painless to show up in church on Sunday morning. It’s simple to read the words in the Prayer Book. It’s undemanding to say the right things. It’s uncomplicated to engage in routine acts of piety. But it’s a great deal more difficult and complicated to *live out* the will of God in ways that demonstrate integrity. For example, it’s an act of piety to put up a big marble monument in the town square with the Ten Commandments engraved on it. But it’s quite another matter indeed to *obey* each one of those commandments—starting with “*I am the Lord thy God. ...Thou shalt have no other gods but me.*” (How many “other gods” are there in our lives?) And how about “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*”? (Let’s not even go there!)

Regarding the scribes and Pharisees, who were the most religious people anybody could think of in his day, Jesus once said, “*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it. But do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they preach.*” [Matt. 23:1] —As a preacher myself, those words are always ringing in my ears. I know only too well from personal experience how much easier it is to preach than to practice!

Ironically, there is great moral danger in the practice of religion. That danger is rooted in the fact that our religion leads us to recognize and become familiar with what is right and good and true. Our religion brings us face to face with the claim of God on our lives. It puts us in the position of *knowing* what we ought to do, so that we have very little excuse when we fail to do it. We can’t plead ignorance. That’s why James, the author of the epistle that we’re studying on Sunday mornings at 9:15, warns his readers to “*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*” [James 1:22]

Last week we had a baptism at the 10:00 service. And, as is the rule, everybody in the church stood up and joined with the parents and godparents of the baby being baptized as we renewed our own Baptismal Covenant. Even if you weren’t in that congregation last Sunday, nearly 100% of you have participated in a similar liturgy on some other occasion. I want you to get out the Prayer Book and look at pages 304-305. These are the familiar phrases that we all say together at a baptism. Right now, let’s just focus on the last three questions on page 305, at the top of the page. These are three out of the five questions that deal with living as a Christian in the world. I’ll read the questions, and you give the answers:

Q. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

A. **I will, with God’s help.**

Q. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbors as yourself?

A. **I will, with God’s help.**

Q. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

A. **I will, with God’s help.**

If we apply Jesus' story about the two sons to ourselves, we'd have to say that most of us are not like the first son, the one who stamped his foot and said, "I will *not*," when his father told him to go into the vineyard and pick grapes, but then – later – went and did what his father asked. We're more like the second son, the one who replied, "O, yes, Daddy, I'll go right now," to his father's request, but actually never got around to doing the work. That's us. We *mean* well. But somehow it's easy to get sidetracked. The Father tells me, "Bruce, go pick grapes today," and I say, "Yes, sir, I'm on my way," but instead of actually picking grapes I spend the whole day lining the sides of the lane that leads to the vineyard with nice big river rocks, making a very attractive curb, and clearly marking out the path. When I'm finished, it's getting too dark to do anything else. But I say to myself, "*Tomorrow I'll harvest those grapes!*"

I don't think for a minute that our church is full of hypocrites (at least, none who are bigger hypocrites than I am). We'd all really *like* to follow through on our commitment to Christ, a commitment we reaffirm at every baptism. But we get distracted. We get preoccupied. And we wind up offering the Lord "religion" when what he's asking for is obedience. We mark out a beautiful, clear path to the vineyard, but we don't harvest any grapes. Jesus said to his disciples, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" [John 14:15]

The first question at the top of page 304 in the Prayer Book asks, "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" And we reply: "I will with God's help."

In the book *Out of Africa* (though the scene is not found in the movie by the same name) a young Kikuyu boy appears at Karin Blixen's front door to ask her for a job as a houseboy, a domestic servant. She hires him, but she's surprised when after three months he asks her for a letter of reference to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim elder living in a nearby town. She offers the boy more money in order to keep him, but he says, "I am not interested in money. I have decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and I came to work for you so that I might see in person the ways of the Christians. Now I shall go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave. Then I shall decide."

"Good heavens," Blixen said, "You might have told me that when you came here!"

It would be helpful to know whether someone else's decision to become a Christian was depending on what they observed in our behavior when we were in our own home or at our work... that they were being influenced not by what they heard from us about our beliefs or about how we worship, but by how they could see us put our convictions into action. Religion is the "box," we might say, the "package," but the *contents* are what counts: our daily lives and our practical spirituality.

We wouldn't stand up in church and repeat the Baptismal Covenant at all if we weren't convinced, in a religious sense, of the *truth of Christ*. But we can't follow through on the Baptismal Covenant until we're able to move beyond the merely religious dimension of our faith and begin to apply it. Beyond being convinced of the truth of Christ, we have to be *converted to the work of the Christian*.

Think about the answers we give to the questions in the Baptismal Covenant. To each question, "Will you...?" "Will you...?" "Will you...?" We answer not just, "I will," but "I will *with God's help*."

We Christians are engaged in a process of growth. Jesus said that we could not enter the Kingdom of God until we became like little children. What is one thing all little children have in common? All little children know one thing: they have a lot of growing to do! The life of faith is a gradual process of maturation, a journey from *decision* to *action*, from "accepting the truth of Christ" to "being converted to the work of a Christian." St. Paul, in words we heard earlier, describes that process as "*working out our own salvation*." And he promises that "*God is at work in us*." The same loving God who brought us to know the truth of Christ in the first place will also empower us to apply it in our lives.

*We* have to make the hard choices; *we* have to make the costly decisions. *We* have to put our faith into practice and move beyond mere "religion". *We want* to do it, and *we will* do it... "with God's help."