

**“A Religion of the Heart”**  
(Mark 6:30-34,53-56; Ephesians 2:11-22)

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**The Task**

Today we are going through divided times. And some of this division is being driven by congregations with new ideas about what it means to be a Christian. And so I would like to share some of the essential features of Christianity that are present in this morning's readings. I think we all need to be aware that where these features are absent, Christianity is also absent. This is so important, because false religion, masquerading as true religion is perhaps the most destructive force in history. And we must be always vigilant.

**Some Important Characteristics of the True Faith**

So, I would like to explore several features of true Christianity. *One* is that it's focus is on the transformation of human hearts and not on obedience to a fixed set of customs. *Secondly*, this transformation involves receiving the gift of compassion; the love of God that enters our hearts. It includes the desire to alleviate the suffering of others, and to bring about a creation where all people may share as fully as possible in God's blessing in unity and peace. *Thirdly*, it is a religion that rejects violence as an acceptable solution. And *fourthly*, there is only one Jesus. If any of these features is being contradicted, then I would suggest that whatever is being preached is not Christianity.

## Transformed Hearts

If we want to talk about what is at the heart of Christian faith, it is this: “A man was walking along the road and came across another person lying in a ditch having been mercilessly beaten. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He bandaged him and took him to an Inn.”

You may recognize this as the beginning to the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a story that describes how something happens within a person’s heart that leads that person to treat others as precious and worthy of going out of his way to care for, regardless of who they are.

Similarly at the last Supper in the Gospel of John, when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, it is certainly because he is moved by compassion for the way their feet must be aching after a day walking on dusty roads. In these and many other stories, it is clear that this kind of heartfelt desire for the well-being of others is central to how Jesus understands himself and to what he looks for in his followers. In other words, what makes a person Christian is the inner desire to live out of the same heart-felt compassion that motivates Jesus.

This is different from the way religion is often thought of. Very often we think of it as something that we just inherit because of who we were born to. If our parents or grandparents belonged to a Christian church, then we think of ourselves and our children as, by definition, Christian too, unless they say otherwise. And along with this, we tend to think that if other people who are generally part of the same

community and share the same customs; speak with the same accent, and dress in a similar way, then that person is probably also a Christian.

But none of these things make a person a Christian. Not even going to church once a year at Christmas time or even telling others that one is a Christian, make it so. These are all external markers.

What makes a person a Christian is a personal transformation within that person's heart; where his or her heart is taken with compassion for others, and where that person accepts Jesus as the ultimate expression of that saving love and commits to following him. Christianity is a religion rooted in the heart, not in the shared customs of a tribe. In fact, there is a strong argument in the New Testament that we must replace our tribal allegiances with an allegiance to the universal love of Christ.

That is the point the Apostle Paul is trying to make in today's Epistle reading and in other letters, when he brings up circumcision. Circumcision might seem like a bit of an off-the-wall topic to us today. But, in fact, Paul's argument makes good sense when we understand that circumcision is a metaphor for the kinds of external markers that we just mentioned.

The first generation of Christians after Jesus's Ascension was dominated by his Jewish followers, who identified themselves in opposition to all other people by having been circumcised. They used this external marker to decide who they could

associate with and who they should refuse to associate with. They used it to decide who was religious insider and who was an outsider. And they refused to associate, let alone eat, with the early would-be followers of Jesus who were uncircumcised Gentiles.

Paul rejected this approach. Instead, he argued that circumcision should be ignored and that what made one an insider was one's relationship with Jesus. And he further held that the true Spirit of Jesus was one that sought to unite both Jews and Gentiles across the cultural barriers that separated them.

## **2. A High Value on Inclusion**

What Paul was calling for is, what at that time would have been understood as radical inclusiveness. He was not just asking his fellow Jewish Christians to find unity amongst themselves. He was opening the door to the inclusion of all humankind. And I would suggest that this desire to including all people, is one of the defining characteristics of true Christianity.

In our reading and in other places, Paul waxes on and on eloquently and forcefully about how the true Christ turns "aliens and strangers into one blessed community," "breaking down the walls that divide us and creating a shared peace".

It is true that there are other places in the Bible that contradict this understanding by advocate for cultural purity and the exclusion of outsiders. But that is not the basic thrust of the Bible. The Old Testament generally sees God as wanting his

people to welcome and assimilate foreigners, especially those in need. And in the New Testament Jesus makes an intentional shift from first offering himself only to his fellow Jews, to offering himself to all people. It is absolutely clear that the desire to be ever more inclusive is at the heart of the Christian message.

It should also be clear from both of this morning's readings that neither Jesus nor the movement that grew up around him supports the kind of "Us vs Them" thinking that is dividing our country today. There was to be no wholesale blaming of others for the world's problems. Instead, Jesus taught his followers that they should take the log out of their own eye before taking the speck from the eye of another. Instead of an "us vs them" view, Jesus saw every person as a child of God, to be reconciled with and grafted back into the family of God's love.

### **3. The Rejection of Violence as a Solution**

And because Jesus took such a high view of the value of all people, he lived as one who absolutely rejected violence. This has been a difficult thing for the church to come to terms with through the ages, especially when it comes to the matter of using violence for self-defence.

It is a feature of Christianity that is difficult for me too. In a perfect world, I am also certainly all for non-violence. But, I am simply not able to hold to an absolute rejection of it, when it comes to protecting the innocent. I really struggle with this feature of Christianity. But one thing is clear. As much as I would like to misrepresent Jesus by massaging his message into one that allows for exceptions,

he just doesn't provide any. The fact is that, in every situation where violence was an option Jesus chose non-violence. He even accepted his own execution rather than allow for violence on his own or even on behalf of his followers.

#### **4. Only One Jesus**

And the last feature I want to mention is obviously central to the Christian faith; that there is only one Jesus. There can never be another "chosen" or "anointed one" who can override the message of Jesus with a different message. If we were to accept such a thing, the religion would cease to be Christian.

#### **The Necessity of being Discerning**

Friends, I do not believe that there is any more necessary and life-giving gift in this world than the divine love that is awakened in our hearts by true religion. But I also believe that there is nothing more demonic and destructive than false religion, and by that, I mean using the language of true religion as a tool in the service of personal ambition or for gaining power or advantages over others.

We live in a time that requires our diligence and our ability to make the fine distinctions that separate false religion from true religion. One will lead us off a cliff. The other leads toward salvation.

