

“Our Religion and Our Character”

a sermon by

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**Text: “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; and the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”
(Luke 7:33-34)**

Over the past twenty years there have been a number of changes in the city of Charlotte. The population of the city has more than doubled. There has been a tremendous surge of building in the Uptown area: office buildings, a football stadium, basketball arena, a Performing Arts Center, the NASCAR museum, condominiums that allow people to live Uptown and most recently, the addition of the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. For those who have witnessed these changes, it has been remarkable indeed.

There has been another profound change in Charlotte over the past twenty years and that is in the diversity of religious expressions that have emerged in our city. Thirty-five years ago Charlotte would have been predominantly a Protestant City. In fact, at one time some years ago, not only were all the members of the County Commission Protestants, they were all members of one church – the Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

Today, we live in a much more religiously diverse city than was the case several decades ago. A large number of Roman Catholics have moved into our city – many from the Northeast, others from Latin American.

There are also a significant number of people of other religions. There are four Islamic mosques in Charlotte today, and a significant presence of Buddhists, Hindus, and other religions as well.

One of the ways that ministers experience this is on occasions when we are invited to speak at events where there may be multiple religions present. I remember some years ago being contacted by a friend of mine, who was headmaster of one of the private schools in our community. The school wanted to have the Baccalaureate service in our sanctuary and he invited me to preach the sermon. Of course, I was glad to do this. After we had talked for a few minutes my friend said to

me, “Bill, you know we have a number of students who are Jewish or represent other religions and we have some families who do not practice any religion, so I thought I might mention that I would appreciate it if you did not make any specific religious references.”

Well, I found myself in a dilemma. After all, I really don't have two different drawers of sermons, one of which is rooted in my faith in Jesus Christ, and the other filled with pearls of wisdom that might be universally helpful to all people. So, I had to tell my friend that if he was coming to this church with this preacher, he might have to endure more religious references that perhaps he might have wanted.

I.

One of the questions that troubles many people today is the question of religious pluralism. For many people all religions are basically the same. Many people believe that all religions are similar in nature and that the world's religious leaders taught basically the same things as well.

So, one of the questions that is often asked is the question of how does a person distinguish between the different religions? Is one better than the other? Do Jews and Christians believe basically the same thing? Are all the great religious leaders alike, that is to say are Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Confucius and the Dalai Lama all comparable to one another?

It is very important today to respect other people's religions. Often, I find myself in meetings with Jewish Rabbis and Muslim Imams. In a city like Charlotte, it is important for religious groups to work together for the common good. Moreover, it is also important to distinguish differences within religions. I remember after the events of September 11, 2001 being contacted by a physician in Charlotte. He and his family were Muslims. They were as horrified about the events of 9/11 as the rest of us. They certainly did not approve or support the radical vision of Al Qaeda and the Muslim extremists. They were also deeply embarrassed by what had happened and they were beginning to feel the pangs of distrust that people were showing to them, just because they were Muslims.

II.

So, I think we need to be clear about the ambiguity of religion. It is like water. It can cleanse and cool, but it can drown and destroy. It is like electricity. It can bring warmth and illumination, but it can destroy and ruin as well. Not all religion is good and some religion is worse than no religion at all.

Jesus once said, “If the light in you be darkness – how great that darkness is.”

Jesus was certainly familiar with the dark side of religion. Early in his ministry he returned to his native home of Nazareth only to be met by a hostile crowd, when he taught in the synagogue. They became so angry at Jesus that they tried to throw off a cliff and he barely escaped. Later in Jerusalem his enemies turned against him and the same crowd that had welcomed him on Palm Sunday demanded on Friday that he be crucified.

So, let's be honest. There is a gloomy, dark side to religion that many people have experienced. Often religion is viewed as negative, as a series of "Thou shall nots" and many people have a very negative view of Christianity.

We have all known people who give religion a bad name. Some years ago there was a well-known British minister named Dean Inge, who taught for a number of years at Cambridge University and was appointed to be the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He had a somewhat dark side to him and was sometimes referred to as "Gloomy Dean." Here are a couple of quotes that I found in his writings:

On human nature: "A cat can be trusted to purr when she is pleased, which is more than can be said for human beings.

On government: "A good government remains the greatest of human blessings and no nation has ever enjoyed it."

On politicians (William Gladstone): "It was said that Mr. Gladstone could persuade most people of most things, and himself of anything."

When someone once asked Dean Inge why he was so gloomy, he replied by saying, "Things were worse than I thought."

III.

But while we have all known people whose religion was a bit on the gloomy side, most of us have also known people for whom their religion was a source of comfort, strength, and great joy.

Certainly that was true of Jesus. To be sure, he was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. But there was another side of Jesus that was joyous, optimistic, life-affirming and filled with great strength.

One of the criticisms that was leveled against Jesus was that he and his disciples seem to enjoy being together. In John's gospel we read that Jesus and his disciples attended a wedding ceremony in Cana of Galilee and when the wine ran out, Jesus ordered the waiters to bring him containers of water, which Jesus turned into wine.

On the occasion that forms our Scripture for this morning, Luke's gospel tells of a time when John the Baptist was in prison – facing execution. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask a basic question: "Are you the one to come or shall we wait for another?" This was a very direct question. John wanted to know whether Jesus was the Messiah or not. Jesus answered by saying that "the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus went on to observe something very basic about human nature and religious leaders. Many people did not like John because he was so stern and so ascetic. Others accused Jesus and his disciples of being wine bibbers and gluttons.

You see there is something very basic about Jesus. He demonstrated a great love of life. He saw more beauty in the lily of the field than in Solomon's temple. He demonstrated and taught a kind of joy that was rare. "Be of good cheer," he said to his disciples, "I have overcome the world."

And on the occasion of the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples, “These things have I spoke unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”

Make no mistake about it. The New Testament is very clear on this subject. Jesus demonstrated a great joy and love of life. He found more faith in the trust of a small child than the religious leaders of his day who went to great lengths to make long public prayers but who in practice were greed and cruel. People were attracted to Jesus because he had a kind of authority that was not present in the Scribes and Pharisees.

In the same manner when the Apostle Paul speaks of the “fruits of the Spirit,” he speaks of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22 ff.)

IV.

This brings me to the heart of the matter and it is that there is a profound relationship between a person’s faith and the character of the life that person lives.

In Acts 1 Jesus said to his disciples, “You shall be my witnesses,” that is to say you shall represent me and people will judge me by what they see in you.

This morning we ordain and install those who will serve in our church as elders and deacons. When the Book of Order describes these offices it makes clear that those of us who serve as officers are called to live by a different standard.

That, I think, is one of the most difficult things about being an officer in the church. Most of us don’t want to be put on a pedestal. We don’t want to be seen as these dour religious types that I have described.

But there is something haunting about Jesus’ words. We are witnesses whether we want to be or not. We are witnesses at school. We are witnesses in the workplace; we are witnesses in the home. Jesus didn’t say, “You can be my witnesses.” He said, “You shall be my witnesses.” You see, we don’t really have a choice. People will judge our faith by what they see in us.

Will Willimon, who was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University for a number of years, once told of a student who came to see him. This young man was very disturbed. He was a member of a Christian church, but he was not active in his faith. His roommate at Duke was a Muslim and this young student was always disturbed because this Muslim young man was always asking him about his religious faith.

Once after a long night of hard partying, this student came back to his dorm room, somewhat under the influence of too many beers. Much to his dismay, his roommate was awake and waiting for him. This young Muslim asked his roommate how he could engage in the behavior in which he was engaged and still be a Christian. This really irritated the American student. He said to his roommate, “I told you not to judge my religion by me.” To which this young Muslim replied, “Then, how am I to judge your religion?”

Jesus said, “You shall be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” God grant us the grace and wisdom to be faithful to the call that has been given to us.

Amen!