

Religiosity or Righteousness

Amos 5: 21-24

Matthew 21: 28-32

I am totally faithful about paying for my gym membership every month. It dutifully appears on my credit card statement each and every month. There is one problem with my faithfulness to my gym membership which is plainly obvious with a cursory glance at this body. I don't go to the gym.

It really doesn't make me feel any better knowing that my wife's gym membership is dutifully paid for each month appearing on the same credit card statement, and my daughter's gym membership is dutifully paid for each month on the same credit card statement, for which she reimburses me. You see, neither my wife nor my daughter go to the gym either. It is a collective family waste of money. But the hope is there that someday – maybe soon – we will get our out-of-shape bodies to the gym. The only benefit that is received from our gym memberships is the reward points that I earn on my credit card.

Now let's say I refused to pay for something that I could manage quite simply and inexpensively on my own. Let's say that I spent an hour or so every other day faithfully working out, walking, biking, lifting weights, doing exercises, and did most of the physical things that I would do at the gym without a gym membership, then my faithfulness to actually doing something about my physical condition would seem to be satisfied, even though I refused gym membership.

This illustrates the conundrum that we see in contemporary church life – nothing new; it's been this way for most of the last two millennia – and which we see reflected in today's scriptures. For example, the church is organized in the belief that attending worship, participating in the performance of the weekly ritual, whatever that may consist of, produces people who act in accordance with the teaching of Jesus. Our tradition comes out of Judaism which similarly believed that performance of the ritual and the keeping of the religious tradition in the Torah Law would produce people who were faithful to the values of God and God's righteousness. In neither case has this been true to any great degree.

That leaves us with this trenchant question: if someone goes to church regularly but doesn't do anything significant in acting in accord with Jesus' teachings, are they what might be called "good" Christians? On the other hand, if someone never goes to church, but does many significant things in acting in accord with Jesus' teachings, are they what might be called "bad" Christians? The question comes down to religiosity or righteousness.

The brief passage from Amos 5 is fairly well known for its closing phrase: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* It is reminiscent for me of Micah 6:8: *What does the Lord require of you, O mortal, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?* In both cases, we may remember the "punch line" so to speak, but we don't pay much attention to the context.

In our passage from Amos, as in the passage from Micah, the context is crystal clear. Listen again as Amos sets the table, starting quite emphatically: *I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your solemn assemblies. Even though you bring me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; though you bring peace offerings of your fatted animals, I have no regard for them. Take away the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

Through Amos, God has pretty well covered the gamut of religious worship stuff that the faithful were doing in Israel. There is no doubt about it; God holds everything they do in worship and religious devotion in utter contempt.

There was a time when scholars soothed the collective religious conscience by claiming that God was upset by what they were doing in worship, that they weren't doing worship right. Today, scholars are more candid. It wasn't that the worship was being done incorrectly, rather the worship didn't produce anything that was remotely faithful outside the sanctuary, out in the real world of real life. Worship was disconnected from meaningful action, meaningful thought, from any kind of righteousness that God was seeking.

God knew what they were doing. They did ritual and religion. They did not do justice and righteousness. The last line spells out exactly what God is seeking: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

The water imagery was not random. Justice rolling down like waters is the kind of cleansing imagery that we find in baptism, a purification of the sinfulness in order to redeem, heal, and make whole. And it is not repetition in the next line – *righteousness like an ever-flowing stream* – in using the water imagery. Remember that in this arid part of the world, streams of water often only flowed seasonally at best, whenever there was rain. Righteousness was not to be a seasonal affair. Righteousness is not to occur only when conditions are favorable, only when it's convenient. *Righteousness like an ever-flowing stream* refers to righteousness that never stops, that is always on and running, an ever-flowing stream. Convenient righteousness, like that perhaps practiced by Israel, and us, is as good as no righteousness at all, at least as far as God is concerned.

Doing right worship, having orthodox traditional beliefs, and being religiously devout are irrelevant and even obnoxious to God if justice and righteousness are absent. If religious practice doesn't produce an urgent desire to bring about the righteousness and justice of God, then don't bother. It's a failure. Worse, it's a mockery of God.

In Jesus' parable of the two sons, we have the same kind of dynamic at work.

Let's pay attention to the context. Preceding the telling of this parable, Jesus is being challenged in the temple by the chiefs priests and elders who challenge by what authority Jesus is doing and saying things, like entering the Temple and driving out the moneychangers, healing the blind and the lame at the Temple, children cheering Jesus by saying "Hosanna to the Son of David," a loaded phrase of political and religious

importance. Jesus was teaching when he was questioned by the chief priests and elders about his authority. “Who gave you this authority?” they demand to know. Jesus flips another question back to them: “By what authority did John baptize? Was it from heaven or from mortal authority?”

The chief priests and elders knew they were trapped, in trouble with either answer. They simply said, “We don’t know.” We can imagine Jesus shrugging as he says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Plainly, the issue concerned how Jesus was assuming a level of authority and respect that was the preserve of the chief priests and elders. Even more problematic, the people seemed very responsive to Jesus, enthusiastic, which made the chief priests and elders feel threatened. You couldn’t have independent actors coming on the scene in the midst of the tender state of relations with the Roman occupiers and upsetting the apple cart. Jesus was a problem who needed to be addressed.

Jesus then tells the parable of the two sons as much to the chief priests and elders as to those who have already gathered to listen to him.

The parable is simple enough. It’s graphically portrayed on the bulletin cover, one of the sons is working and one of the sons is not. Yet each son had responded to the father differently when instructed to go out and work. One son said he would go, but he didn’t. The other son said he wouldn’t, but he did. Jesus asks, “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” Of course, “father” can also be indicative of God instructing two sons to go and work for God.

Jesus doesn’t say it explicitly, but it’s clear that the chief priests and elders are like those who say “yes” but don’t do the work of God in the world. They’re astute, profound, and exacting in the work of religiosity, but that isn’t the work of God in the world that’s called for.

Jesus does say that *the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you* [the chief priests and elders, the religious, devout, and pious leaders]. That’s quite a damning statement for them to hear – tax collectors and prostitutes are ahead of them!

The image of John the Baptist returns as Jesus says: *John came to you to show you the way of righteousness* – this is God’s righteousness, like we just heard in Amos. *You did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did.* And you still don’t get it; you still haven’t repented and believed in that sacred way of God’s justice and righteousness.

What we hear from the prophets and from other places in the Hebrew scriptures is God’s displeasure with meaningless worship, ritual practices made irrelevant by their disconnection with God’s justice and righteousness. We get the same kind of thing in Jesus’ ambivalence toward the Temple, and his outright hostility to the religious authorities and their teachings that similarly disconnect from God’s way of justice and

righteousness. Jesus's reform movement seeks to instill the spirit of God's will into faithfulness. Jesus doesn't care if you've been branded sinful, unclean, or outcast if you faithfully seek the way of God's justice and righteousness, because that's what matters. The careful observance of Torah-Law and religious tradition don't produce what God wants or what Jesus wants.

For contemporary people of faith, the same message applies. The reason is that good worshipers are simply good worshipers and nothing more unless they actively prioritize and pursue God's way of justice and righteousness. The proper performance of ritual and the devout observance of religious tradition produce people who tend to be good at ritual and tradition, not justice and righteousness. In fact, they get self-righteous because they're so good at ritual and tradition, and will resort to all kinds of arguments to deny any responsibility for God's way of justice and righteousness. Jesus and prophets like Amos ran into the same thing.

That may be why Jesus never told anyone to go to church, go to synagogue, or be scrupulously religious. He told them to be faithful to God, to serve the Kingdom of justice and righteousness, of peace, healing, and new life. That message applies to us.

As we're invited to the Lord's table, we come to bear witness to his ministry, and his gift of new life for all people throughout the world. We share it with witnesses across the globe. The Lord's Supper acknowledges that acting in faithfulness to God comes at a cost, because God's justice and righteousness are not often welcome in the world. Those who bear witness to it can expect that there will always be certain costs. But we're invited to be such witnesses, to share the table, and most importantly, to share his ministry.