

“Burned Out on Religion?”

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-29, 58-67

Romans 7:15-25, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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What does it take to get your attention? If you are like me, at least when it comes to the mail I get, it takes something special. I get so much junk mail, offers for this or that, that I throw most of it away with very little scrutiny. Another way of looking at what it takes to get my attention is to look and see what I give my attention to. As I do this, I notice that my attention is given mostly to trying to live up to an expectation I have of how I am supposed to live. And, if I am not giving my attention to how I am supposed to live, what life is supposed to be like for me, then I am simply hoping to make life enjoyable, including escaping the pressure of my expectations. I can get so caught up in my pursuits and the attendant activities, I can see how it is hard for anything else to get my attention.

Jesus, in today's gospel seems to be suggesting that folks had similar problem – an unwillingness to give their attention to what God was doing in their midst. Perhaps they, too, were caught up in their beliefs and practices that kept them busy and were not open to hear anything different. Jesus says that they wrote off John the Baptist because he was too austere and smeared him with the label of a partygoer that spent his time with sinners. Jesus notes in Matthew 11:20-24, which we skipped this morning, that some cities would experience troubles because they refused to see God at work among them and refused the offered healing and good news.

Were they so busy with what they thought already and their attempt to make their expectations reality that they were blind to Jesus' work? Yet, Jesus says that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, the proof is in the pudding. What happens, how well life really works out, describes the wisdom of the choices. Seeing what Jesus was doing, paying attention, offered a way to know what God was accomplishing.

Now as we hear Jesus use the word “wisdom” we might, and I do, wonder what he is talking about. I generally think of wisdom as especially good insight. But, as I looked at the lexicon definition of wisdom, I found that it has the sense of mastery. We use the word *master* in few ways similar to this. For example, we talk about master teachers, master carpenter, master gardener or a chess master. What I noticed about this inclusion of the idea of mastering something is that it is not only insight about the game, or the activity, but it is an ability to play the game or engage in the activity with great proficiency.

The proficiency with which one does the activity defines the mastery. What is Jesus talking about mastering? I would suggest that the core of what Jesus is talking about is our relationship with God and the concomitant way of life shaped through our relationship with God. We often use a word for this life shaping relationship with God—religion. The interesting thing about the word religion is that we end up often defining religion a little differently. This is at least one common definition of religion: the observance of a specific set of fundamental beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a group of people. Notice in this definition God is absent. I think we generally think religion is involved with God somehow but when the focus becomes my beliefs and

practices and as I allow these beliefs and practices to become what I give my attention, I can miss what God is doing and what God is calling me to do.

Paul in today's reading from Romans is noticing how his beliefs and practices were failing him and leaving him doing what he did not want to do. In his zeal to inculcate a fundamental belief and the way to practice it, he found he was missing God's work in his times. Paul knows he needs to be rescued and claims that there is one who does rescue him. Paul describes Jesus as our rescue from the confines of failing beliefs and practices.

Perhaps, it is useful to look up from our expectations and habitual way of doing things to check how well it is working, to see if we see particular ways that are working, or deeds that demonstrate wisdom. When asked if he is the one by John the Baptists' disciples in the scripture just preceding today's gospel reading, Jesus notes his deeds: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Basically Jesus says you see healing and hear the good news, and you see the work of God, the mastery of Jesus of the human situation and the right relationship with God. Jesus goes on to note the close relationship between father and son, and how through this relationship grace is available to everyone that comes to the Father through the Son.

Yet, I notice a sticking point. To follow Jesus means change, means I might need to give up or modify my religion, my fundamental beliefs and practices. Even when the ways I know do not seem to be working, or when these very beliefs and practices are confining and becoming more of straight jacket than a way of healing and good news, I find it difficult to refocus and give my attention even to God. My religion may be getting me down but I have a hard time letting go until I am completely burned out. I can begin to believe I am wise and knowledgeable and miss what God is doing. I can think I have managed to master life and find that all I have really done is confined myself to a dead end way of living and of being religious.

Jesus seems to be addressing this directly when he offers us the way out. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest, he invites us. Can we recognize our burdens and the ill fitting attempts we make to deal with them? Jesus offers us the rescue, the rest we need for our souls. Turning to him, and the work of God he embodies, we are invited to a way of life that works, rescued from becoming burned out on religion, a burden that is light and a yoke that fits. Not that we have no work but it is work that fits who we are. Instead of trying to jam a square peg in a round hole, we find the work and the way of life and relationship with God that fits, we find the healing and good news needed.

What do we give our attention too? Do we try to preserve the form, shape, traditions and habits of our lives, or do we let Jesus get our attention? Jesus invites us to see beyond religion that burns us out or confines our souls. He invites us to come and find rest for our souls. Relief for the burden and hope for tomorrow, the rhythms of grace and the strains of new life, where the burdens are appropriate and the work fits who we are made to be when we come to Jesus and follow him.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Amen