

**St. Andrew's Cathedral**  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Sermon for September 2, 2018 ~ Proper 17B  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

If you want to know what's about to happen in an Episcopal worship service, just pay attention to the Collect of the Day. It gets that name because it "collects" the people to focus on the main idea of the day's worship. For example, today, we prayed,

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Today's collect is quite ancient and is shared on this very day in the worship of Anglicans and Roman Catholics around the world. Reflect with me on this collect in light of today's passages of Scripture.

**We pray, "Graft in our hearts the love of your Name."**

If you were listening to today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (Song of Solomon 2:8-13), you may have found yourself wondering, "What's this doing in the Bible?" That's a fair question. The Song of Solomon is not a part of the Bible we hear, study, or refer to very often. In fact, this is the only Sunday in our three-year lectionary with a passage from this book, and even then there is an alternative reading from Deuteronomy about the giving of the Divine Law.

Contemporary biblical scholars think this book actually refers to faithful and mutual love between a man and a woman. However, pre-modern interpreters saw in this poetry a description and celebration of the divine love between God and God's people. The metaphor of marriage for the relationship between God and God's people is found in both testaments.

So, in the older tradition, when we read, "My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one..." it is God, the Lover of our souls, who is speaking to us, God's beloved.

The passage is to stir up in us a love for the God who out of love gave us life, sustains our life, and redeems our life when we treat it with disrespect. It calls us to turn to God and say in authentic ways, "I love you too, with all my heart. Make my life worthy of the Love that gave it to me."

**And, we pray, "Increase in us true religion."**

Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees recorded in today's gospel reading speaks directly to the matter of true versus false religion.

So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” (Mark 7:1-8)

Jesus responded to the Pharisees’ criticism of his disciples by pointing out to them that they were more concerned with the form of religion than with the substance of religion.

How are religion and spirituality related? Can you have one without the other? My own response is that religion, like other things that draw their name from the Latin root *ligare*, connects things, ties things together. So, for example, religion is supposed to connect our spirituality with the tangible world in which we live. Spirituality without religion may have no tangible effect. And religion without spirituality may be just an act.

James writes, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:26, 27)

Today, we pray that God will give us religion that will connect our spirituality, our inner love for God, with everything and everyone else – a religion that is authentic.

**And, we also ask that God’s true religion will “Nourish us with all goodness.”**

Religion at its best is at the service of God, an instrument of God in our lives for the ongoing process of creation. The Christian Church is God’s gift to us. With its practices, teachings, and disciplines, the Church is God’s instrument that is supposed to transform us internally in ways that purify us and make us truly “good.”

Then [Jesus] called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:14, 15, 21-23)

Through our communion with God, our inner being is nourished with goodness. So, you might say that the divine impact in our lives is an inside job. The goodness we seek is not our own goodness, but something much better – the goodness of God, what James calls “God’s righteousness.” God’s righteousness stands in contrast to self-righteousness. It was the self-righteousness of the Pharisees that prompted Jesus to call them “hypocrites”, which means “actors.”

When the goodness in us is God’s authentic goodness, our lives bear good fruit.

**So we pray, “Bring forth in us the fruit of good works.”**

A collect is a particular kind of one sentence prayer with a very specific structure involving an invocation, a petition, the reason for which we ask, and a conclusion. This is the part of the prayer that expresses the reason for which we are asking. We pray that God will *graft* the love of God in our hearts, increase in us authentic religion, and continue to feed and transform our inner being ***so that our outer actions will be a blessing and not a curse.***

James writes,

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures... But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-they will be blessed in their doing.” (James 1:17, 18, 22-25)

Love, religion, and goodness that are true, authentic, real are more than words. These inner qualities of spirit find expression in outward actions. Here’s a story that sums it up.

On November 16, 1959, "The Sound of Music," the timeless Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, began a three-and-a-half year run on Broadway at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. Several weeks before the show’s opening, Oscar Hammerstein was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Prior to being admitted for surgery, the famed lyricist stopped at the theatre to convey encouragement and inspiration to his leading lady. He passed a piece of paper to the young actress playing Maria von Trapp.

As Mary Martin opened the folded note, she read, “A bell is not a bell till you ring it. A song is not a song till you sing it. Love in your heart isn't put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away.”

Although Hammerstein would die less than a year after being diagnosed, the simple definition of love that he had scrawled on a piece of paper would impact Mary Martin for the rest of her life.

Love and everything else we have received from our creator isn’t for keeping but for giving away. Our connection to our Creator and our birthright is for us to have a divine effect on the world that is greater than any effect the world may have on us. In our story of creation, God created human beings and endowed us with godlike qualities. Then God gave us the vocation to be stewards of everything else. The role of religion is to help us draw upon divine resources so that we help God move this constantly evolving universe toward God’s ultimate purpose - Love. This love is not simply “liking someone” or “being nice,” although, those are desirable things. It is mainly the decision of the heart and mind to seek the welfare and justice for others, as God seeks the same for each of us. When our behavior reflects our profound love for God and God’s profound love for creation, true religion is probably involved. It is our prayer that God will increase that kind of love, authentic religion, and goodness in us so that our spirituality will find it fullest and most fruitful expression. “Love in your heart isn’t put there to stay. Love isn’t love till you give it away.”