
LIVING RELIGION

A sermon given by Gwen Moore
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FIRST PARISH CHURCH UCC BRUNSWICK

LESSON FROM THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

2 Peter 1:3-8, 12

The Christian Scripture lesson this morning is from 2nd Peter, chapter 1, verses 3-8 and 12. In these verses, Peter gives assurance to early Christians of God's continual and consistent action in human affairs. It also outlines what the faithful must do to live their faith.ⁱ

³His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape the corruption that is in the world..., and may become participants in the divine nature.

⁵For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge,

⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness,

⁷and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

⁸For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹²...I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you.

Here ends the reading of the lesson.

“Religious images are powerful things.” So said our interim pastor Winston Baldwin in a recent sermon. Indeed, religious images are so powerful that we often find ourselves caught between the poles of competing certainties by those who claim to own the truth that religious images symbolize.

In her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass points out that some even try to revise Christian and American history. She writes:

“In recent years, conservative evangelicals have created a kind of cottage industry out of America’s Christian heritage. ...Across America, conservative Christians are claiming history as theirs—remaking the past in their own theological image of a Christian nation, even a specifically evangelical Protestant one.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Another contemporary voice challenging of those who claim religious truth as their own is Krista Tippett, a Peabody Award-winning journalist and author. In her book *Speaking of Faith*, Tippett is critical of the “shrill and violent voice[s] that [throw themselves] in front of microphones and cameras in the name of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Try as many might to impose their religious views on the rest of us, I believe that we would all agree that there is not a unitary interpretation of Biblical stories, or a single right answer to the contemporary questions we grapple with as a people.

The thoughtful analysis of today's religious by Tippet and Bass—and many more like them—aims to help us to see, in Tippet's words, the “countless lives of gentleness and good works [that] we need to see...to understand the whole story of religion in our world.”^{iv}

The point of all this is that those who claim to be “the” voice of Christianity must assume that it is static and dormant, having been defined largely in and around the time of Jesus. But Christianity is not a single, fixed whole. It is more like a living multi-celled organism that is forever growing and reshaping itself in response to the environment around it. Christianity is not static. Christianity is a *living religion*.

In this case, *living religion* means the entire theological inheritance for our tradition that has been “shaped by history, by economics, by politics, even by geography...”^v

At the same time, we ourselves are *living religion*. Personal living religion is what monk and author David Steindl-Rast calls Religion with a Capital R. Capital-R Religion, he says, “is the religion of the heart” where “the heart stands for the whole human person, for the innermost center of our being, for our totality...” He also emphasizes that for a religion to be true for us it must be true in our experience, saying “if it isn't true in your experience, then it is irrelevant to you.”^{vi} ...*if it isn't true in your experience, then it is irrelevant to you.*

Our living religion is something we *do*, not something we *know*. If we don't do something to get beyond precepts and principles and make religion come alive for us, we risk being deprived of the very comfort we hope to gain from our religious lives in the first place.

I'd like to share a story with you of one woman whose comfort was sorely disrupted. I'll call her “Frieda”—not her real name, of course. She was a long-time member of the congregation I served in Massachusetts in the 1990's.

After a class one evening, Frieda asked if we could talk. I had been at the church for a few months, so I knew her to be someone who was quite earnest in her religious practice. She set aside time each day for prayer and reading scripture. She studied religious questions and was active in worship and in our religious education program.

The instant we sat down, she asked: “Where is God?” Frankly, I was a little startled by the urgency of her question. I asked her to say a little more. She said this: “When I was a child, I learned that God is ‘up there,’ separate from us – guiding the world and all that happens. But that's not where I *feel* God to be. I feel Him inside me, all around me. I feel wrong feeling this way; this isn't what I learned.” She hesitated for a moment and then looked at me and asked, “*Am I wrong?*”

With this last question, it was clear that Frieda was alienated from her faith. She was alienated from her faith because what she was taught she *should* believe was at odds with what her heart told her was true.

As if anticipating Frieda's angst, in the Gospel of Thomas Jesus teaches^{vii} that the “kingdom is inside you.” In the third verse of this Gospel, Jesus says:

³...“If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

When you find yourself struggling to bring the kingdom alive within you, you actually stand on very rich ground, as did the woman whose story I shared with you earlier. The ground is rich because when we struggle we are more vulnerable. And when we are vulnerable, we are reminded of the preciousness and the fragility of life. When we are vulnerable, we gain a renewed reverence for life and our place in humankind and the universe.

The Christian Scripture lesson this morning was written at a time of great social change. The people Peter writes to live in a permissive pagan society when false teachers were shaking the ground of Christianity. It was a time when the people Peter writes to were struggling to keep their religions alive.

In this context, Peter gives them some advice on the ways to live Christ's teachings. He tells his readers to focus on goodness, to pursue knowledge, to exhibit self-control, to endure, to aim to be godly, and to embody affection and love. Peter's advice is equally relevant today.

But how do we do this? How do we bring the "kingdom" to life? How do we create a personal, living religion for ourselves?

I wish I could share some deep, religious secret about how to do this. But I can't. There is no single way to learn to live religion in our daily lives. But I warrant that there are some common elements involved in our quests to find our own way. We must:

- *invite it,*
- *struggle with it,*
- *nurture it,*
- *defend it.*

We need to learn to let our quest continue when it scares us, and stick with it even when it is daunting.

Invite it. I know that I am not alone in the challenge of how to breathe life into religious values, to create a habit of the heart. Like most deeply held aspirations, the only way to develop them is to keep practicing.

It is vital to sometimes literally sit down and remind yourself that it is living religion you wish to practice—to remind yourself that you can focus and endure, trust and hope. Remind yourself to keep your sights on the visions and the dreams you hold. Remind yourself that volition and intention are always present in you.

Struggle with it. In this culture, if you tell someone that you have been "talking to yourself," they'll look at you funny. But that's exactly what we need to do to foster a living religion. The self-dialogue that comes from struggling with tough questions is invaluable in developing a deep understanding of our personal religious lives. Well known priest and writer Henri Nouwen talks about "being believers [while at the same time...] feeling many doubts."^{viii} I quote from Nouwen:

The many contradictions in our lives – such as being home while feeling homeless, being busy while feeling bored, being popular while feeling lonely, being believers while feeling many doubts – can frustrate, irritate, and even discourage us. They make us feel that we are never fully present. Every door that opens for us makes us see how many more doors are closed.

But there is another response. These same contradictions can bring us into touch with a deeper longing for the fulfillment of a desire that lives beneath all desires and that only [our deepest, religious truth] can satisfy. Contradictions, thus understood, create the friction that can help us move toward God.^{ix}

Nurture it. We do not know precisely how religion renders its effects on men and women. We do know, though, that gaining religion's benefits calls for action. In his landmark review of the impact of religion on people's lives, William James concluded that prayer or inner communication is a key. James writes that prayer is the "process wherein [the] work is really done, [where] spiritual energy flows in and produces effects" for us in the world.^x

Whether one is drawn to prayer or meditation or solitary walks by the sea, nurturing our living religion calls on us to establish some ritual that brings silence and time for reflection into our lives. This opens us up to what we really wish for ourselves, to our heart's desire. Without silence, calm, or

stillness, we risk severing the connection between our heart and our mind. We lose sight of our desire to have our religions come alive and be present within us.

Defend it. Reach beyond your experience. Often we learn the most when we venture beyond our comfort zone. For example, one of my fondest memories from Harvard Divinity School is of discussions of things religious with friends. Rather than talk of politics and weather, we would ask each other: Can nature give you spiritual comfort? What do you make of stories of Jesus' healing? happens when we die? I remember, in particular, many discussions with a staunch Southern Baptist in cowboy boots. We couldn't have been further apart in our beliefs and approaches to the world. Yet, in our debates about our personal religious truth, we learned much from each other about the quality of caring, about the place of meditation and prayer – and, I must add, about our ability to listen to someone we disagreed with.

In the same way, studying scripture and religious writing is also a valuable guide. Proverbs and the books of the Hebrew Bible called “wisdom literature.” Sacred books from the East. Martin Luther and Annie Dillard. We can study old and new alike, asking, “What lessons are here for me?” This question often brings us face to face with things we believe and things we don't. But either way, we learn where we stand on religious ground.

Learning to live our religion is like learning to play a musical instrument: the more you practice, the better you get at it. Before you know it, you are accomplished. Peter wrote of the challenges of leading a religious life in his letter to the early church. He knew that living one's religion was not easy.

I would like to close with a short selection from Proverbs, chapter 4. The voice of wisdom is speaking:

- ²⁰ My child, be attentive to my words;
 Incline your ear to my sayings.
²¹ Do not let them depart from your eyes;
 Keep them in the midst of your heart;
²² For they *are* life to those who find them,
 And health to all their flesh.
²³ Keep your heart with all diligence,
 For out of it *spring* the issues of life.

Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life.

Amen.

ⁱ NRSV (Proverbs passage mixes NRSV with NKJV)

ⁱⁱ Bass, Diane Butler. *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. New York: HarperOne, 2006, 28

ⁱⁱⁱ Tippett, Krista. *Speaking of Faith*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007, 9.

^{iv} Tippett, Krista. *Speaking of Faith*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007, 9.

^v Drawn from Brother David Steindl-Rast, “Religion of the Heart,” accessed 7/4/09 from http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_ReligionHeart.htm

^{vi} Drawn from Brother David Steindl-Rast, “Religion of the Heart,” accessed 7/4/09 from http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_ReligionHeart.htm

^{vii} James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990, 126.

^{viii} Robert A. Jonas, *Henri Nouwen: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 48.

^{ix} From “Bread for the Journey,” taken from Robert A. Jonas, *Henri Nouwen* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 48.

^x William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982 (originally published 1902), 485.