

LENT 4 2011
Matthew 7
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Central, Anchorage

THE DANGER OF RELIGION

Sir Alexander Fleming, upon introducing the newly discovered drug penicillin, warned against taking too little of it. An underdose, he explained, would permit bacteria to remain in the system, allowing them to build up an immunity to the drug. The immune germs could be “passed on to other individuals so that the thoughtless person playing with penicillin treatments may be responsible for the death of another,” if not his/her own death.

Something similar can happen in the spiritual realm when people “play with religion,” exposing themselves to just enough of it to become immune to the real thing. People come to worship just enough to assuage their guilt and quiet their conscience, just enough to avoid a genuine encounter with God. Perhaps they send an occasional offering, their “religious dues”. They’ll joke about attending church, saying the walls would surely come down should they darken the threshold of the sanctuary. They figure they got enough of that religion stuff in Sunday school days or confirmation classes, but now they’ve graduated and they don’t need anymore “religious training”. They can say the Lord’s Prayer much like they say the pledge of allegiance to the flag. They know enough about God and church to make them immune to really knowing God, loving God, thanking, serving, praising and obeying God.

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

These are tough words, strong words, especially when for many the church is like a service station, a place to drop in for a quick fill-up, such as a baptism, confirmation, wedding or funeral. This style of putting the Christian faith into practice reminds me of a person who is seriously sick, but instead of going to the doctor, clinic or hospital for honest-to-goodness diagnosis and treatment, chooses to self medicate with over-the-counter pain killers. Lots of people do much the same for their spiritual health. We are like foolish men building our house upon loose, sandy soil. When the earthquake or flood hits, the house falls. Such is our religious foundation. We have religious feelings, sentiments, and beliefs, favorite hymns, but where is the follow-through? The being and doing of faith? The following in the Way of Jesus?

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

There is a danger in being religious. The danger is that we practice certain religious customs rather than living the faith, committed, faithful, responsive, obedient to God. We talk the talk but don’t walk the walk. We take the gate that is wide and the road that is easy. The narrow gate of faithfulness is beset with difficulty and the road of discipleship is one of affliction, distress, conflict and controversy, leading to the cross. No wonder “false prophets” arise. They sell us the religion we prefer, one that fits the culture, one less challenging than Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.”

So, we are prone to infect this Way-of-Jesus faith with our own way, teachings, values, notions of success, patriotism, fundamentalism, moralism and such. We take just enough religious medication to make the germs in us immune to real religion, real faith, real discipleship.

After all, I'm a pretty good guy, why would I need a savior? Why would I need to repent, turn around and go in a whole new direction? Why would I need to die to myself and live a new life under the power and authority of Christ?

Jesus tells the little parable of the wise man and foolish man. I think some of us associate this parable with the story of the Three Little Pigs and the bad wolf who huffs, puffs and blows their houses down. In that story, only the house with the strong building materials manages to survive. But in Jesus' parable of the Two Builders, it's not the building material that is at issue, it's the building site. Upon what foundation do we build our life, our relationship to God? In whom do we place our trust, faith, and loyalty?

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them, does them,
will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

The critical thing about our faith in and following of Jesus is the FOLLOW-THROUGH. The question is not "To believe or not to believe;" the real question is "To obey or not to obey."

In the waters of Baptism we are drowned. We die. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. "We were buried with him by baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life." When we let go of owning and controlling ourselves, making something of ourselves, when we die to our religious delusions and inoculations, so we might hear Christ's words and do them, trusting and obeying, then we discover that though the waters be 20,000 fathoms deep, they do not overwhelm us. In letting go we are lifted up. In the hands of the Crucified One we are safe, whole, alive, able to walk in newness of life, obedient to God's Word and Way in this world.

There is danger in religion. With just enough to make us feel safe we may become immune to the real thing. The real thing is dangerous, too. It means dying. It means jumping into the 20,000 fathoms deep water trusting that in the drowning I am saved and finally made to walk on solid ground, ground that I can build upon—like a rock.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.