

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the seventh Sunday of Easter 2021: "a way of life"

It doesn't do any good to sugarcoat things, right? Some of Jesus' farewell words to his disciples can sound downright laughable within the context of the two thousand years that have passed since they were spoken.

The chapters in John's Gospel immediately preceding the Passion story are a long discourse, interspersed with prayer, that Jesus offers to his friends as he prepares to depart for the heavenly places. "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one," is one such prayer.

On this Sunday after Ascension Day but before Pentecost, our attention is turned sharply to Jesus' departure and to words such as these. But they can seem like a cruel joke!

"That they may be one?!" The Church has fractured hundreds, if not thousands, of times since this prayer was uttered. And while it may be a little less across ostensibly religious lines these days, humanity continues to fracture just about everywhere we look.

But not all hope is lost. There's an important distinction we can draw, and if we do it successfully, maybe Jesus' prayer for unity can ring true after all.

I'm going to introduce two terms. One of them you surely already know, but I may be using it in a somewhat different way than you're used to. The two terms are: religion and religiosity.

These two words obviously have a common root, but their meanings are radically different. Religiosity is adherence to a set of concrete propositions about things divine. It's rigid belief in the sort of doctrine that can be captured in legalistic writing. It is measurable and involves lots of yes-or-no propositions.

Religion, however, is a way of life based in relationship with God and God's other creatures. It is what the earliest disciples called "the Way" before a term such as "Christianity" even existed.

There is, of course, some overlap between religion and religiosity. No faith assembly, ours included, is completely free of doctrine, and there's nothing wrong with this. The most obvious example is the outline of the faith known as either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed that we speak at nearly every worship service.

But it's our relationship with this doctrine that makes all the difference. If the Creeds are just a checklist of propositions we need to believe adequately in order to call ourselves legitimate Christians, then we are living in the realm of religiosity. But this is clearly *not* their purpose. Why, if they were simply a checklist, would we prayerfully recite them week after week, rather than just once and done? They are, rather, a framework within which to live a particular way of life, a context within which to practice true religion.

A good way to understand this might be through an example from nature. Several years ago, I attended a clergy retreat in North Carolina. One afternoon I stood alone among some trees near the retreat center. Some were alive, and others were dead. At

first glance, the dead ones looked stronger. The living ones were thin and supple and seemed to sway dangerously in the wind. The dead ones were more or less immobile and looked quite sturdy. But I knew full well that this is an illusion. In a strong enough wind, the dead ones would simply crack and fall down while the living ones, even having received a significant battering, would ultimately survive and remain upright.

Practicing religion as is like being the living trees. It means holding doctrine not as a proposition that demands our assent but as a framework within which to live an extraordinary way of life. It means trusting that when we pray there is a living Presence on the other end of the conversation. It means trusting that as we think, speak, and act, it is all occurring within the protection and guidance of a wise and loving Spirit that is infinitely larger than us and our human affairs.

The living tree image is really a helpful one here in so many ways. The flexibility of living trees isn't infinite. They know where their roots are, and staying connected is the highest priority. And at some point they reach the limit of how much they will bend, and then they return to their ground state with vigor. But they are supple and giving, and their first response to any stress or strain is to give a little ground.

Now I say all this with the utmost empathy for the temptation to settle for religiosity. It offers the allure of certainty, and it is just plain easier. Religion is by far the more difficult path. Why? Because the work is never done.

Religion is a practice in the same way that yoga is a practice. Yes, we can develop greater skill over time, but the day when

practicing like a beginner is no longer necessary for us never comes. When we are practicing religion, the disciplines of participating in liturgy, receiving the Sacraments, studying Scripture, praying, and having fellowship with other pilgrims on the way are ones to which we must continually apply ourselves over and over, from birth to death.

And this is because they are not ends unto themselves, but rather means to an infinite end, that end being a strong relationship with God and with one another.

The main reward of practicing religion as opposed to religiosity is obvious: we actually get what we came to church for. We get a living relationship with God and God's creation.

But there's a second reward too. And that is that it creates a window of opportunity for Jesus' prayer for unity to actually come to fruition.

The overwhelming majority of our schisms and conflicts occur in the context of religiosity. And of course they do...when one static doctrine confronts another, there must be winners and losers. Ultimately both sides usually lose.

But when religion is what people are practicing, something quite different occurs. There is a capacity for unresolved tension to remain while relationships stay intact and even grow and thrive. There is acknowledgement that the divine container within which our interactions are occurring is big enough to hold us and our tensions. And there is a clear-eyed understanding of when we have come upon one of those rare occasions when tension is, at least for a season, too much for our roots to bear.

Jesus' prayer for unity in the days leading up to his departure from us is not only an appeal to God. It is an appeal to us. "Be one as the father and I are one," he pleads. He asks and expects us to take a very active role in God's reconciling work. That role can be fulfilled when we practice religion and refuse to settle for religiosity. May God empower us to do just that.