

Lent – A Time of Renewal of True Religion
John 11:45-53; Matthew 26:57-68
March 29, 2017

John 11:45-53 *Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.*

Matthew 26:57-68 *Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ” Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” “He is worthy of death,” they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?”*

Grace, mercy, and peace from the one and only true God, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The one and only true God, that statement makes an implied secondary statement. If there's only one true God, then there is only one true religion. If there's only one true religion, then we had better make sure we know what it is and live it.

At an international gathering in New York, a young American asked a cultured young woman from Burma about the religion of her country. She said that most of her people were Buddhists. The young man said rather casually, “Oh, well, I don't suppose that matters much. All religions are about the same anyway.”

The young woman looked him straight in the eye and said, “If you had lived in my

country, you wouldn't say that. I have seen what centuries of superstition, fear, and indifference to social problems have done to my people. We need the truth of Christianity. When I became a Christian, it cost me something. I suffered loss of friends, income, and social standing. If your religion had cost you more, it might mean more to you."

As good Lutherans, we know, at least I hope we know, that all religions are not alike. We don't all pray to the same God and just use different names for him. The god of the Buddhists is not the Triune God. The god of Islam is not the Triune God. The god of the Jehovah Witness or the Mormon is not the Triune God. As good Lutherans, we know that there is only one true God, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I did this little exercise because before you can have the true religion you must first have the true God. Once we are sure we have the true God we must be sure that our religion matches our faith. You see, faith and religion are not the same. Our faith is our trust and belief in God. Our religion is how we live out that faith.

The first thing we should do is look at some things that people call religion but aren't really a true representation of religion. Some people have a religion that is like church bells. Like the church bells their religion is kept in some high and lofty place. And like the church bells their religion is heard from on holy days, for funerals, for weddings. The rest of the time they keep it enclosed, silent, voiceless, and dead.

Then there are those whose religion is like a spare tire. Spare-tire religion works like this. A spare tire is something most everyone has. Although it's not a necessary and immediate part of the machine, it becomes necessary when you have a puncture or a blowout. It provides insurance against being stranded on the road. The religion of too many in the church is no more than a spare tire. They belong to church and support it in a way, but their religion isn't really a part of their life. It's just a spare tire in case of trouble.

There are also those who have a Play Dough religion. These folks have the idea that they can bend and shape their religion any number of ways so it always suits the situation. There is no real rigidity to their religion. They warp their religion so it can adjust to whatever the popular trend of thought might be. They can even add new things to their religion like a little Eastern mysticism, or a little liberal tolerance, or just a smattering of political correctness. It's just like mixing Play Dough colors to make beautiful new colors. But every time we make a new color the original color becomes more obscure.

And there are those who are sure that true religion is a beautiful cathedral-like building that's been around for a hundred years. These folks link their religion to the bricks and mortar of the place they call church. And, while the building might hold many special memories and feel comfortable, it certainly is not what true religion is made of.

All of this brings us to our readings for tonight and to a man named Caiaphas. Caiaphas

was the high priest at the time of Jesus crucifixion. And Caiaphas is a good example of what can happen when religion goes astray and loses God as its focal point.

The reading from John occurs right after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. The word got back to the Pharisees and they were very concerned. As they kicked around ideas about how to handle the situation, we get a chance to see just how far their religion had slipped.

Listen again as the Pharisees say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." They were concerned about losing their nation, but that was the second thing on their list. Their first concern was losing their place. If you look in your Bible you may see a footnote at the word place. The place they were afraid to lose was the Temple, the building.

The Pharisees had lost their focus on God and their religion had boiled down to protecting the survival of their national heritage and their Temple, in other words, bricks, mortar, and cultural history. Caiaphas had gotten so embedded in this line of thinking that he suggested that it would be better for an innocent man to die than for them to lose their identity and their building.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus had been brought before the Sanhedrin and was enduring a mock trial led by none other than Caiaphas. Everyone was looking for false evidence to hold against Jesus but none could be found. Finally, Caiaphas, without knowing it, asks Jesus for the truth. Caiaphas asks Jesus if he is the Son of God.

When Jesus answers truthfully and announces that he is the Son of God, Caiaphas' shows just how blinded he had become by his religion. You can bet that every miracle that Jesus had performed had been reported to Caiaphas. You can also bet that Caiaphas knew the Scripture well and had at his disposal everything necessary to confirm that the man standing before him was truly the Son of God.

But Caiaphas was not concerned about what was right or true. Caiaphas was concerned about maintaining what he held to be true religion. Caiaphas' misunderstanding of true religion made him blind not only to the truth of Jesus' words but also to the fact he was standing in the presence of the very God he professed to believe in. His nation and his Temple were Caiaphas' religion.

So what is true religion? What is the practice of faith which God would have us do as true religion? For the Christian, true religion is leading a God-pleasing life. The Bible gives us guidelines on what it takes to lead a God-pleasing life. And if that isn't enough, Jesus spent 30-plus years on this earth to give us a living example of true religion.

Jesus lived the life that God wants all of us to live. Jesus lived a life of service to his neighbor. Jesus never passed up a chance to help the needy, to feed the hungry, to love the unloved and the unlovable, to comfort the mourning. Jesus spent his time

thinking more about other people than thinking about himself. The focus of Jesus' life was what he could do for other people not what they could do for him.

Jesus was also faithful in his service to his Father. Jesus knew his mission and he carried out his mission with fervor. Jesus had a message to spread. Jesus didn't spend all his time talking about the weather, or this year's olive crop, or the local camel races. Jesus spent his time talking about God's love for people and how God was providing for their eternal safety. Jesus lived out his religion by pointing people to their Lord.

And Jesus isn't the only example of true religion you can find in the Bible. Take Abraham. He left everything he had ever known because God told him his work was somewhere else. That's true religion.

How about Joseph. Read Genesis and hear him tell Potiphar's wife, "How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Running from sin – that's true religion.

The Bible is crammed full of accounts of true religion; David taking on a nine-foot giant, Gideon leading an army, Moses going back to face Pharaoh, Elijah against 450 prophets of Baal. These people understood that true religion is living out the faith they had in the one true God.

How about you? Are you living a true religion? Do the things you say and do run parallel to the things you confess in church on Sunday? I'm not trying to judge your life or your religion – that's your job. But I do encourage you, this Lenten season, to take a look at your faith and your religion. That means take a look at the things you profess and the life you lead. They should agree. If they don't, pray for the help of the Holy Spirit to make your faith and your religion pleasing to the Lord. The Bible tells us that the one who trusts in the Lord will not be disappointed.