

Sermon: "What I Did Over My Summer Vacation."

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Proper 17 Year A: Matthew 16:21-28

What I Did Over My Summer Vacation.

One of the nicest things about summer vacation is actually having the time to read some of those books and magazines I accumulate in ever-growing stacks throughout my house! Not only does that endeavor entertain and enrich me, it helps assuage my guilt about the amount of money I spend on subscriptions and Amazon.com!

One particularly thought-provoking essay I read while on vacation was in the Christian Century magazine and written by Martin Thielen who is a United Methodist minister. The article was titled, "The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion but Good Religion."

Thielen begins by citing the experience of Charles Darwin. Although born an Anglican who considered a call to the priesthood, by the end of his life Darwin had become an atheist. Many people believe Darwin renounced Christianity because of his new belief in evolution, but that is not true. Darwin insisted that evolution and religion were not incompatible. Instead what caused Darwin to lose his faith was bad religion. The defining experience for Darwin was the death of his ten year old daughter. Darwin blamed God for her death. As Thielen writes, "He quit believing in God altogether. He simply could not believe in a God that killed off ten-year-old children. I don't blame him. I don't believe in that kind of God either." And neither should we, because to do so is bad religion.

In our opening Collect this morning we prayed for the Lord to "graft in our hearts" several things including the "increase of true religion." I think it's fair to say that for those of us who earnestly seek to know the mind of God and to do God's will in our lives, that true religion is good religion. The problem we encounter is exactly how do we define what "true" or "good" religion is? As the old saying goes, "One person's meat is another person's poison."

Certainly not all religion is good. There are many expressions of religion – both Christian and of other faiths – which I find disagreeable if not downright abhorrent. In other words to me they are bad. To cite an extreme example: any religious expression that advocates, oppression of, violence toward or killing of people who do not adhere to its particular set of beliefs is to me really bad religion. It is also bad religion when children are sexually abused by clergy and the response of that religion is to engage in a cover-up to protect the clergy and not care for the

children. It is bad religion when a faith group believes that publicly burning the sacred text of another faith is a righteous thing to do. It is bad religion to believe that life is sacred when in utero, but not so much when it is in poverty.

There are a lot of issues surrounding bad religion the least not being that it is obscuring good religion. Plainly put, bad religion is giving good religion a bum rap, resulting in a growing belief in our society that all religion is irrelevant and even toxic and therefore needs to be rejected.

The Public Religion Research Institute recently released a survey that reported the number of people who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated – aka “the nones” –rose 4% in just two years to over 20%! This makes people with no religious affiliation the third largest group in the United States, following Evangelical Protestants at 26% and Roman Catholics at 22%. Mainline denominations, of which we Episcopalians are a part, weighed in at 17%. The reality is that bad religion is driving this rapid increase in the number of “the nones.” Bad religion is causing people to abandon all religion, compelling them to choose No Religion.

The issue of bad religion versus good religion is addressed in the sharp words of Jesus toward Peter in today’s Gospel.

After Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, be killed and then raised on the third day, Peter is horrified. Peter grabs Jesus’ arm and rebukes him saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Jesus looks at Peter and replies, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

In this exchange Peter represents bad religion and Jesus, naturally, good religion. You see although Peter had grasped the fact that Jesus was God’s Messiah he still did not grasp what that meant and what it entailed. For Peter it meant something totally different from what it actually was for Jesus. For Peter the Messiah would be a person who used violence, power, manipulation and ruthless authority to his make his faith the dominant religion. Yet if Peter and the other disciples had been allowed to go out and preach these ideals to others in the name of Jesus, it would have resulted in fear, violence, rebellion, subjugation, pain, and death; essentially it would have perpetuated more of the same old, same old. Peter’s way for Jesus to be the Messiah was set on very human things. For that very reason it was bad religion.

It is why Jesus silences him. He knew that before anyone could preach the authentic Good News about him they first had to learn what that really meant. They had to understand that it is Jesus’ way of life that is true, good religion. They had to walk the talk of that life. They had to deny human things like their need for power and control ,and they had to do this by picking

up Jesus' cross of sacrifice, humility and radical love. To do that is to set one's mind on divine things, Jesus says. To do that is to gain the real life that the only the Gospel gives.

Oh, that we could similarly silence today's purveyors of bad religion with Jesus' words of truth and make it a prerequisite that they really understand who Jesus really is before they ever preached about him!

In his response to Peter's arrogant, judgmental, legalistic and violence filled bad religion, Jesus offers us a healthy alternative of good religion. He gives Peter the good religion of justice, compassion, mercy, grace, humility and above all radical love.

This is the religion that Jesus gives to the world. It is the religion for which he suffered and died. It the religion we are to proclaim because within it lies the resurrection to new life.

Theilen concluded his article by saying, "Promoting that kind of religion is what mainline . . . churches are all about. We are not perfect by any stretch. But we try to offer healthy faith to the world. We promote a religion of grace, not judgment. A religion of love, not hatred. A religion of open-mindedness, not intolerance. A religion of compassion, not legalism. A religion of humility, not arrogance."

Growing numbers of people are sick of the arrogant, power-driven, closed-minded, hate-filled, repressive religion they encounter in the world. Our culture, including many of "the nones," is starving for good religion. Good religion is the bread of life. In their hunger people are ready to be fed with the alternative life-giving faith of good religion.

The answer to bad religion is not no religion but good religion.

Who's willing to go and feed them "nones" some good religion?

Amen.