Growing in True Religion

As many of you know, my husband Joe and I moved into our new home a couple months ago. Soon after we arrived, I shared with you the chaos of unpacking and moving. That’s pretty well settled down on the inside of our house, but outside…it was a different story. We live in a beautiful, brick, colonial home. But surrounding our house was an almost jungle-like variety of overgrown plants. Forsythia bushes, hostas-gone-wild, little volunteer tree sprouts that had grown into healthy, big trees.

We quickly realized the situation was beyond our ability to take care of. So we hired some folks to come out and help sort through it. On Wednesday we stood in the hot sun looking at the patch of overgrown trees and bushes. “I mean…we’re just going to have to see what’s back there,” the landscape manager said. “Who knows…it could be anything…” And we agreed to level it down the ground, and then start over.

I tell you all of this not just to update you on Joe’s and my process of settling in, but because it has some relevance for all of us.

There’s a theme of simplicity that threads its way through our texts today. In the Gospel, Jesus cautions us against our tendency to make religion more complicated than it needs to be. He warns us, no matter what our religion, not to get too hung up on our rules or traditions, like ritual handwashing, in the case of today’s Gospel. Instead, he pushes us towards a simplicity, a kind of purity, where our actions match our words, and we put God above everything else.

And then in our reading from James today, we get a stripped-down and simple definition of religion. The author of the letter grabs our attention with this pronouncement that pure religion is this: “To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

That’s it. That’s all: Love God, and care for the people in the world who have no one else to care for them.

There’s something really appealing about the kind of simplicity we hear about today.
But in our complicated lives, it can be hard to feel like we’re living that dream at all. So how can we find this simplicity, this true religion?

Well, we’ve already asked for help on this. Because in our opening prayer we said: “Lord, graft in our hearts the love of your name; increase in us true religion.”

We just said we want our actions to match our words, so what did we just ask God for? What does it mean to graft something in our hearts?

This is where the gardening theme comes in again. Because grafting is a gardening technique where you tie one plant to the root of another, in hopes that the new young shoot will grow. If you look at pictures, you’ll see that this involves literally tying plants together with tape or string. To the untrained eye (mine), it looks like sticks tied together. It’s not very pretty or exciting. But what’s happening is a biological process of collaboration and training. New plants, binding themselves to more established ones, sharing nutrients and soil, and working together towards growth.

So when we ask God to graft something in our hearts, we’re asking God to tie us together with something that will help us love God more. What kinds of things help us love God more? And love others? Well, this is where church comes in: it’s like a spiritual kind of garden where we can practice this grafting. Over here, we have the roots of caring for others through outreach, and there, formation, for people of all ages to grow in their love of God. Then over here we have welcoming the stranger, and there, the roots of caring for our facilities and financial resources.

All of this – all of these programs and events – exist as a way to bring us closer to God. We tie ourselves to these roots, and God brings about the growth.

So that’s how we find our way to true religion: stripping all of our excesses away, and tying ourselves to God. It can sound really easy when we just say it, right? Just live simple lives and love God, and you’re set!

But those of you who’ve ever done some major clearing away, whether it was deep cleaning de-cluttering your house or yard,

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1 Proper 17 Collect, Book of Common Prayer, p. 233
Or doing the kind of deep internal work we’ve talked about today, knows it’s not always simple. It’s not easy to clear away the layers and layers of ourselves that get in the way of living out this true religion. The brambles of perfectionism, envy, pride, and fear.

And it’s the same with the external parts of our life too – it’s hard work to renovate a house, or plant a garden, or, like our situation this week, tear out bushes and trees.

I experienced this to be true this week. When I got home on Wednesday after the gardening crew was finished, I found a yard that felt brand new. Where there were once overgrown shrubs, there lay newly-tilled dirt. Suddenly, and for the first time, I could really see the front of our house, and not towering rhododendron bushes. It felt fresh and renewed and so good.

I stood on the front sidewalk taking it in with admiration and awe. And then I saw various people walking by, staring at the house and the yard, and not really smiling like I was.

Then I saw it through their eyes: patches of mud where there used to be bushes, shutters unevenly sun-soaked and faded after being covered for so long, a bare landscape all around.

It actually, if we’re honest, looked pretty awful from the outside.

As I thought about it this week, I wondered if my experience of seeing my house can offer just a glimpse, a fraction, of God’s experience of seeing us? Maybe this is how God looks at us in our attempts to strip ourselves down and find this true religion? At certain stages, we might look pretty ragged ourselves. We might, sort of like my house, have some mismatched parts, be unevenly sunsoaked, and a little dirty.

But God sees us in this state and in our attempts at faith, and my goodness, to God, we look as beautiful as ever. God sees us and loves us with the kind of love we hear about in the Song of Solomon. The kind of love that sees us in our unkempt, totally in-process states, and says “You are beautiful. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song of Solomon 2:10),
Come away to a place of true religion and simplicity and growth.
And, my God, who are we to say no to this invitation?
To the invitation of new life that’s calling us always.

So God, our prayer is the same as the generations before us:
“Bind our wandering hearts to you,”\(^2\)
“Increase in us true religion,
Nourish us with all goodness,
And help us to bear your fruit in this world.”\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Robinson/Maden, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, verse 3 - https://hymnary.org/text/come_thou_fount_of_every_blessing
\(^3\) Proper 17 Collect, Book of Common Prayer, p. 233