

“Very Religious?”

“Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.’” That was an extremely effective way to begin his address to the people of Athens. Paul is building on something in which the Athenians took great pride. Paul picked up on this when he toured the city and saw ***“the objects of your worship.”*** So he comes to them to congratulate them on ***“how extremely religious you are in every way.”***

Many people today take pride in the same thing: religion. Unfortunately, pride in religion all too often becomes pride in self. Moreover, it becomes pride at the expense of the other who may not share your religious views. I recently heard someone describe a conversation with an eleven-year-old who told her, “God hates you,” when the woman expressed views that differed from this child’s. That child was a member of Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas, the church that pickets military funerals to protest homosexuality (so it’s not hard to imagine where the child picked up her religious viewpoint).

Beyond their religious affiliations, Luke informs us in the verse just before our lesson today: ***“Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”*** Paul will jump on that, as well. ***“. . . as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”*** His proclamation was, in fact, a repudiation of their “religion.”

Let’s talk about religion. I know, it’s one of the two topics you ought not discuss (politics being the other), but let’s talk about religion anyhow. What is a religion? We are inclined to look into the encyclopedia where we discover: Christianity, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism — the Big Six, referred to as “the major religions,” based on number of adherents. Further down the ladder we run into such “honorable mentions” as Ba’Hai, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, New Age,

Taoism, Rastafari, and many more.

What these all have in common is a set of beliefs, values, understandings, and rules. It is my contention that of all of the above, the most important is (survey says!) RULES. Gotta keep the rules, so you'd better know the rules. If you study any of these religions, you will discover that rules abound. There are dress codes, behavior codes, food regulations, rules about relationships, sexuality, and finances. Judaism is noted for this; as is Islam — but you find it also in the other four “majors,” including Christianity. And, insofar as Christianity is a religion, rules rule. Certain branches of the Christian religion are more inclined to stress rule-keeping and rule-breaking. Others fabricate rules that they think are enjoined by the Scriptures (all too often, they go back into the Judaic Law; but you find some that are supposedly drawn from the New Testament, such as a requirement to speak in tongues). Are rules wrong? Yes and No.

No. Rules in and of themselves are not a problem. We need rules: stop signs, traffic signals, No Trespassing signs, “Must be over 18,” deadline April 15 — these all have a place in an ordered society in which we would like to live. We get bothered by the rule-breaker — the idiot texter driving the car ahead of us (or worse, behind us!); the neighbor who won't turn down the foundation-shaking bass volume; the person with 30 items who insists he belongs in the “12 items or less” lane. We can get hurt by the rule-breaker — the idiot texter driving the car ahead of us; the person who doesn't know how to handle the gasoline in the garage that then explodes. We can even die at the hands of the rule-breaker — the idiot texter driving the car ahead of us; the irresponsible gun owner who leaves his weapon accessible to his child. So, No, we cannot say rules are wrong.

But then, Yes, rules are wrong — if we come to believe that rule-keeping is the key. I tuned in late, bottom of the eighth of an Indians game (yes, this was back when they were still the Indians) and caught this tidbit of banter in the booth — I have no idea about whom they were speaking, but the comment was that she had said she “wasn't sure she had enough ‘brownie points’ upstairs.” (The booth guys expressed how many people felt that way.) I'm sure they do, and that's the problem. When your

religion become a matter of scoring “brownie points” there is no good news.

Now, who does that? Everybody who sees themselves as part of a religion. The Athenians’ religion was spread very wide. There were dozens, even scores, of gods and goddesses that made up the Greek and Roman pantheon (not to mention the demigods that stood under them). How many statues did they have erected? I cannot say for sure, but 400 years before Paul was in Athens, Pericles had directed that hundreds of temples be erected around as many statues, so there were a lot of images of these deities. Yet they lacked one statue which caught Paul’s eye — an empty altar **“with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’”** The Athenians were allowing for the idea that they did not have all the answers.

Paul wanted to clue them in on how answer-less they were. Your “unknown god” has been revealed, he tells them. Then, beginning with creation (because the Greek pantheon had no concept of there being a god who created anything; all their gods and goddess controlled things), Paul lays out this God known to Paul (more on that in a moment). Read through his sermon in front of the Areopagus and you discover that, in essence, Paul is letting the Athenians know they had been worshipping an object, not a personal God, a “what,” not a “whom.”

The “whom” is what matters. That is why rules-based religion is not where you want to be. You wind up worshipping the “what” — the rules, the laws, the “shalts,” the “brownie points” — not the “who.” Thus you wind up in hopeless despair, because you can never get the answer to the question, *“Did I score enough ‘brownie points’?”*

Christianity cannot be left to be a religion; it is not a religion (I don’t care what Wikipedia says) — it is a faith. Faith insists on knowing the who, not following the what. That was Paul’s advantage: he had a direct experience of God. I don’t mean just the encounter on the Damascus Road, but an ongoing relationship that steeped him in the concept that God was with him. So intimate was this relationship that Paul could write to the Corinthians that God has sent him a **“thorn in the flesh”** for this

purpose: *“to keep me from being too elated”* by *“the exceptional character of the revelations”* Paul was experiencing of God.

But what about today’s Gospel? Jesus tells His followers (not just those in that physical space with Him, but us as well): *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* Isn’t that about ‘rules’? Well, let’s examine how many commandments Jesus gave: *“Love one another as I have loved you”* [John 13:34]. He reiterated the Old Testament commandment: *“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”* [Matthew 22:37-39]. He did speak about the commandments; but to my knowledge, those are the two He said mattered.

You will notice that both of those involve relationship: love. Jesus concludes: *“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”*

“ . . . reveal myself to them.” That’s what Paul was expressing. It’s not a statue; it’s not an idea; and it’s not rules — God is a person who makes Himself known. That is a quintessential Christian message: God is with us. But, you may want to say, *“I haven’t had the kinds of revelations Paul had . . . or the Twelve . . . or so many others.”* And I would counter, *“Yes, you have; you simply were not paying attention!”* Here’s another problem with rules: they keep us from paying attention to what really matters, which is the presence of God with us. And don’t begin to think that this word, *“I will love them and reveal myself to them,”* is solely an end-time message. It is a here-and-now promise.

So tomorrow, when you take your shower, be aware of that cleansing water as a sign of your baptism, what brought you into relationship with that God who reveals Himself. When you come forward to receive His Body and Blood, do so, not as a ritual, but as a regained experience of Christ being present, not just to you, but in you. When you enter into His Word, do so with the understanding that you are not doing so just for

understanding, but for engagement with the very present God-in-Christ. When you go to prayer, take the time to be silent, to be filled with the wonder that God is present, to listen, and be present to respond. When you are with fellow-Christians, don't just ask about their day, or the grandkids, or how work (or retirement) is going — all of those are fine topics — but get to some real questions: *“Where did you experience God?” “How did you respond?” “Where did you have sense of God’s absence?” “What did you do in reaction?”*

No, Christianity is far more than a religion — it is a faith-relationship with a living God who created us, dwells among us, is in the process of saving us and reshaping us, who heals us, restores us, stands with us — in short, who loves us. It's not the rules; it's the Ruler. It's not what we think, it's how we relate.

It is my desire — and I pray yours — to be not very religious, but certainly to be faith-filled and faithful.

Amen.