

I always think of the word religion as a bad word – a negative word. For in my mind religion is about performing acts or rituals to please God. Religion is about honoring holy spaces and holy people, religion is about offering sacrifices and speaking liturgies to influence God's response. Religion is about we humans doing things to change God – following set patterns that are intended to satisfy God's demands. Religion is going to church to fulfill an obligation or giving an offering to do our duty. I always think of religion as something we humans have dreamed up – most every culture that has been encountered has religion – acts or rituals that are intended to appease the gods. I do not think that God is much interested in religion.

Look at John the Baptist. John greeted the crowd with these words: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

John knew it was a time of crisis, a time of judgement. The ax is lying at the root of the trees, at any moment the ax will begin the cutting, the chopping, fruitless trees will be burned. What should the people do? Run to the temple and start offering sacrifices? Spend time in meditation and prayer? Put on sackcloth and cover themselves with ashes as a sign of the sorrow for sin? Are these the sorts of fruits that God is seeking?

The people do not know what to do so they ask John, “What then should we do?” John replied, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” John did not send them to the temple or to the practice of religion but to their neighbors who are in need.”

Tax collectors asked John, “Teacher, what should we do?” John told them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Again John might have called them to some extraordinary religious act but he told them to simply do their job fairly.

And soldiers came and asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Doing their work honestly was the fruit God expected from them the work they were paid to do.

If I ask you, “Where do you serve God?” Would you talk about your involvement in the church – its boards and committees and circles? Would you tell of ushering or being a cantor or a musician? Would leading prayers come to mind or taking to communion to shut-ins? While all of these are good things John would teach us to look in other places. You serve God in doing your job well, whether that work be in industry or in business or in retail or in education. Wherever people are helped or protected or guided God is at work there through you. If I go through the checkout line and am greeted cheerfully and items are handled carefully and the transaction is carried out accurately then I am served and the store is served and the owners of the store are served and God is served in that. That is what John is making clear today in telling soldiers and tax collectors to do their work well. Even these professions that in that day would have seemed furthest from God were places where John understood that fruit for God could be borne.

And also in sharing. When neighbors get together to do the work none of them could do alone God is served. It happens in your lives, you help a neighbor – that neighbor in turn helps you. It is a good thing.

And God is served when we take an extra coat or extra cash and help another.

I heard an interesting fact on the radio the other day. Those who give to charity are healthier and more prosperous than those that do not. And when giving increases health and prosperity increases. It is as if God has designed we human beings to share – in sharing we ourselves thrive. We are healthy trees full of fruit when we are serving God in our work and in sharing. And our neighbors are blessed.

John expected that when the Messiah came that he would come to bring the end, the harvest, the gathering of the wheat and the burning of the chaff. But when Jesus followed John he came not to bring an end to life as we know it but to celebrate that life. Jesus was even less interested in religion than John. So often Jesus healed people who were isolated by their disease, healed them to send them back into daily life.

God entered everyday life in Jesus. God's first appearance was not in the temple nor in the palace but in the place where cattle were fed. Common workmen – shepherds – would be the first to visit him there.

This day God is entering every day life in you. In your work and in your sharing God will encounter every day people. And you and they will be blessed.