

You may know the story of Job begins with God and Satan having a conversation. You may also know the story ends with Job remaining faithful to God, but what you probably don't know is that after this episode Satan was furious and challenged God to assemble a team, and play hell in a game of basketball. God laughed and said that's just sour grapes. You know we have all the best athletes in heaven. But if you insist... The day of the game, heaven shows up with all the most phenomenal athletes ready to play and in walk a bunch of players from hell, hung over and looking terrible. God says: what is this a joke? I thought you really wanted to get back at me. Satan says: it's not a joke, and with a smile, he lets all the referees out of the van...

A cute joke the week of Halloween, but actually pertinent to our readings today. How often do we need referees to keep us in check when it comes to our faith? How often do we use religion as a way to win an argument or convince someone of our ways? Certainly, in our gospel passage today this is the case, once again. We come to the end of a section of Matthew, not long before the crucifixion, where Jesus is teaching in the temple and meets many challenges by the religious leaders. To be fair, Jesus' presence in the temple, teaching, although not a rabbi or priest is in and of itself a challenge. One can easily argue he is the one using religion to start a fight. But since it's Jesus, we know that he is not proving a point so much as inviting people to remember God's love for them and for us all. In the context of the gospel, the religious leaders are at fault, because they use religion to prove a point.

In this final provocation, Jesus replies by talking about loving God and our neighbor and then dismisses his challengers with a reference to the messiah which they cannot challenge. But even though we may cheer Jesus on that he has won a victory, zooming out from these pages, it's all really quite sad. Is this why people practice a religion? Is this why we show up to temples and churches? Of course not. What is the purpose of religion then?

Religion helps us move into a way of being so that in all we do, it is affected by who we are. In this way religion is less about doing than being. It's like when read in Exodus that God is to be named I Am. This is a state of being or existence. It is not an activity. But God's being infuses all that exists and therefore all that happens has God's stamp on it. Our way of being inspires and shapes our actions. Let me give a bad example from my own life. We had our last outdoor movie night this week and I am very proud of our wardens and other volunteers who worked so hard to put this on. The first week, as we were setting up, the technology was not cooperating and people were staring to show up. I know that when technology doesn't cooperate I have a very short fuse. So I got more and more cranky as time went on and was certainly not the best version of myself. Why is this so bad?

The role of a priest is to be among other Christians and help us all grow into the full stature of Christ. In our tradition as Episcopalians this is done through sacraments, pastoral care, organization, and being in community. But these activities are never as important as how these activities are done. If a priest rushes a liturgy, is short in conversations, neglects responsibilities, and gets ornery when people need patience and kindness, it doesn't matter what one does, the action matters less than way it is performed. Now everyone has a bad day but generally speaking, a priest's way of being is very important and when I get cranky at people because a computer

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doesn't cooperate, I can potentially ruin an event and turn people off not only from wanting to be around me but more importantly from being part of the church.

So as people of faith, we want to allow the practice of our religion to shape our way of being. This should infuse all we do and influence our decisions regarding what we ought and ought not to do. In The Relevance of Religion, former senator and Episcopal priest, John Danforth says: *But the cross doesn't co-exist with self-interest; it is its antithesis. Although seldom realized perfectly by sinful humankind, it pulls us out of our self-absorption, orients us toward the Kingdom of God. Unlike patriotism, the Christ of the Cross is more than even a very important part of life. Christ of the Cross is the way, the truth, and the life.* Danforth goes on to discuss how people who would otherwise be very gracious to all find themselves willing to win an election at all costs, even by mudslinging. Emphasizing the point that focusing on a way of being that we bring to all we do is essential for all of us and, as Christians, the focus of our faith practice.

As we round the corner to election day and we fall into a typical state of being as a nation at this time, we would do well to remember the relevance of religion for our lives. I am grateful to this former Republican senator and Episcopal priest who provides reasonable guidance as to how we might conduct ourselves as Christians who are also citizens of this nation. If we want this nation to be the best it can be, yes, of course we have to exercise our democratic privileges responsibly and at least as importantly, as people of faith, we have to remember our way of being in all that we do.

Now I want to be very careful here not to neglect that scripture makes it clear in many places that our way of being should bear fruit. James says that faith without works is dead. Jesus says we will be known by our fruits. And again he says where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. In other words, show me where your money is and I will tell you where your heart truly is. So that if religion helps us focus on our being, this ought to be seen in our actions. To look upon human suffering and do nothing is to be complicit in the cause of that suffering. When we don't see the evidence, we know the roots of the tree are not healthy. This brings us to Leviticus today where God speaks to Moses saying be holy as I am holy. Then goes on to describe what this way of being looks like: be just, care for the poor, do not slander, no vengeance or grudges, and do not have hate in your heart. Yet, being cranky because the computer isn't cooperating is suspiciously missing from this list...

Those who have challenged Jesus these past weeks in our readings from Matthew know passages like the one we have in Leviticus today but sadly, they have not allowed them to shape their way of being. We can pause and wonder how we might practice our faith in a truly holy manner, allowing our time with God to shape and mold us. The good news is that everyone is invited into a heartfelt way of practicing one's faith that leads to real transformation. Holiness is not a goal to be achieved but a natural way of being that we bring to everything we do. How might we live in this way – how might we be this way? Perhaps Philippians can end this sermon best: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things.