

Religion has been in the spotlight these days. One candidate questioned the religion conversion of another candidate. Then there was an uproar when Starbucks came out with red cups that didn't have any "religious" symbols on them: no snowflakes or reindeer or Santas or anything else "religious." Now folks are reacting to the horrific acts of terror in Paris, anxious about the fact that there was no warning that ISIS was engineering these attacks. Some people have become more worried about the Muslims in their midst, fearing that their religion may have led them to be part of terrorism. Others have become more religious, praying for the people of France and the victims of these shootings and bombings. Many of us, Christians, Jews, Muslims, are praying for peace in a world that seems to have totally lost its way to peace. (pause)

What is religion anyway? What does it mean to be "religious?" When asked this question, one young man replied, "I know when I was a kid if someone said another kid was religious it meant that their parents made them go to church every week. As a teenager if someone was described as religious it meant that they wouldn't be much fun on a date."

Listen to this definition, which was put forth by Robert Capon: "Religion is the attempt of human beings to establish a right relationship between themselves and something beyond themselves which they think to be of life-giving significance." (*Health, Money, and Love*)

"Religion," according to this definition, is the human attempt to get a handle on the key to life, to plug into power, to find the program that leads to happiness, meaning, self-esteem, or whatever it is that gives a person life. The program may be about God, the good life, weight loss, confidence, good health, success, whatever. Regardless, it is still religion, if Father Capon's definition is accepted.

Retired UMC Bishop William Willimon wrote about religion as something PEOPLE try to do: "A by-product of most religion is fatigue. Since every religion insists that you've got to do the whole thing right, we're forever flunking religion. There are uptight, terribly difficult-to-get-right religions like golf. Even after you've mastered a nine iron, there's the Niblet staring at you from the bag demanding that you get it right, too. There are seemingly relaxed religions, like psychotherapy, telling you that all you've got to do is relax, let go, and free associate about your relationship with your mother. But in every religion, there are certain things that must be gotten right if you are going to get hold of the universe. .. In other words, the relationship to that 'something beyond ourselves' which would give us life is always (according to religion) UP TO US. In this way, religion is a one-way ticket to failure. (*Pulpit Resource*, vol. 43, No. 4, p. 30)

*If religion is what we do, then we are never going to do enough. On the other hand, if our faith is rooted in what **God** has done for us, then we will never want to stop responding.*

In the reading from Hebrews 10, we heard, "Every priest stands day after day...offering again and again the same sacrifice... But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, **he sat down** at the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10:11-12) The writer to the early Christians was trying to tell us that, in Jesus, God has done something that is beyond any "religion" we can conjure up. The writer expressed this truth in a way the hearers of his day would have understood. The

priests would stand up and make the sacrifices day after day, over and over... And still the folks had to bring in more and more animal to sacrifice because nothing wiped out human sin for very long.

It's sort of like housekeeping. Day after day Woody and I struggle to clean our house, but just as fast as we put things away and sweep up animal hair and do laundry, those tasks re-present themselves as though they had never received any earlier attention. Dust and laundry and dirty dishes are an on-going battle; from the human point of view, so is sin. Sin keeps piling up, and we can sweep it under our life furniture or scrub at it with good deeds and prayers of repentance, but there's only ONE THING that can *really* make any difference when it comes to sin, and that is the Son of God, Jesus, who has made the **once and for all sufficient sacrifice for our sins**, and even for our inability to be "good, religious people."

"Religion" is what WE try to do for ourselves. Christ offers us something way beyond our own efforts! Through Jesus, we are given what God has *already* done for us.

William Countryman, in his book, *Good News of Jesus: Reintroducing the Gospel*, offered the following: What God says to you in Jesus is this: You are forgiven. Nothing more. Nothing less. This is the message Jesus spoke and lived... But most of us know forms of Christianity that relay a message very different from this one. They say things like this: "Good news! If you are very, very good, God will love you." Or, Good news! If you are very, very sorry for not having been very very good, God will love you." Or (most insidious of all), "Good news! God loves you. Now get back in line before God's mind changes."

Here's a story: Once upon a time a man had a son, who lived in the same town but who made little effort to see his father. The man decided that the only way to get the son's attention was to mention his will to him. He called him up one day, and said, "Son, I've been thinking. I haven't seen very much of you during the last twenty years or so, so I just may change my will to reflect our relationship." The old man had lots of money, so the son started visiting him after the call. But the father always feared, deep down, that his son came to see him only because of the money, and not out of love for him.

One of the father's friends was in a similar situation, with a son whom he rarely saw. The two fathers talked about their sons, and they decided that the second father would try something different with his son. He called up his son and informed him that he was going to start giving him and his family (the son and his wife had three children) \$50,000/year since he could give them up to \$10,000 each tax-free. There were no strings. No visits, no IFs. The checks would be sent to the son's house bi-annually until the father died. The two fathers sat together and the second one questioned, "Will my son respond? If he does, will it be out of gratitude or out of guilt? Or perhaps I'll never see him now, since he knows the money is all settled." Both fathers yearned for a relationship with their sons.

Jesus used the image of "Father" to talk about God's love and forgiveness when he told the story of the Prodigal Son and his eager-to-forgive Daddy. God is like a father who yearns for us to WANT to let God be in our lives, who yearns for us to want to know God through prayer and the Bible and

to live appreciating the lives we have been given. Too often, we are children who go through our days with blinders on, physically and spiritually. We're like teenagers with our ears stopped up with our own music and our eyes lifting little beyond our own feet. We don't see the beauty of the world around us, or appreciate the incredible balance of nature sustaining us; we fail to be amazed by the intricacies of our own bodies and minds. We tend to be fixated on our own comforts and schedules. Too often, we treat God as though God is just about comatose in a nursing home, which we usually visit on Sundays. Otherwise, God is sort of left out of our lives, unless we run into illness or hardship or terrorist act.

“Our help is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in ANY time of trouble. (Psalm 46)

We who call ourselves Christian have been given a tremendous gift: forgiveness and love - enough to cover ALL human sin forever. That's enough to forgive a parent who took the lives of his/her children, or the terrorists who ravaged Paris on Friday and threaten us now, or a drunk driver, or whoever is draining the life out of us for whatever reason. The one sacrifice - Jesus - was enough, even for the most awful treachery and hatreds, because it is an action of God for us, God's gift, sufficient for you and me. A clean house - internally - forever! But there's more. There's also the chance to respond. We've been given the power to share this incredible gift with others, not so much through words or doctrines or explanations, but through the way our lives rub against the lives of others.

My son studied electricity several years ago. One thing about electricity is the fact that one never knows whether a circuit is good until the whole thing is connected. The same with a battery. It can sit around for a while, but until it's connected to something, even if that something is just a tester, there's no way to tell whether it has power.

It's the same with us: We discover the real power of God's gift to us ONLY when our lives get connected in a circuit, for it is THEN that we can see Christ's love flowing through, whenever we give light to someone else whose life has been dark or dingy. When we find ourselves forgiving, we realize how much we ourselves have been forgiven. When we are able to really care for another person, suddenly the profundity of God's caring for us becomes real.

We all have our religions. But beyond our religions and the limitations of our best understandings and intentions, we have God. And best of all, **GOD has us!**

Bombs will devastate... Nations will bicker... Politicians will make promises... Threats will cause us to tremble... but God remains God. Jesus has made the offering, once and for all; he sits down, for our salvation has been accomplished! No matter what happens in your life or in this world, don't forget God: God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. God is our blessing, our Shepherd and our hope, because God loves us and offers us grace, forgiveness, and love. May we respond by sharing the same with others. Amen.