

“The Search for True Religion Continues”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
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READINGS: Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Today, I want to start from the beginning. Now that may seem like a gratuitous statement – don’t we always start at the beginning when we do anything?

Not in my experience. Often when reading the newspaper I start at the editorial page, or the classifieds, depending on what I am looking for. When I read a book I may read the forward first or I may read it last, after I have made my own assessment of the book, to see what someone else had to say about the author and his/her style and depth of argument.

Today I begin at the start of the book of Genesis – the beginning of the Bible. And the start, or near start, of the gospel of Mark.

Here we have what two authors think are the beginning of the faith journey – the coming of light to illumine the darkness, and the baptism of Jesus as the mark of the beginning of his ministry.

Now if you were writing the Bible, or giving a synopsis of Jesus’ life, where would you begin? Others, notably Matthew and Luke, started the story of the life of Jesus with his birth, and indeed even before his birth with stories of prophecies predicting his birth.

And accounts of the beginning of the world in other faiths do not necessarily start with the dichotomy of light and darkness, but may identify other elements as more basic to discuss.

If we are going to seek what is the true religion that we should live and share, then we need to be clear about where the beginning points are.

For Mark, that beginning point is the baptism of Jesus. Mark identifies the liturgical act of baptism, which today is called by almost all Christian communities a sacrament of the faith, as a basic tenet of being a true Christian.

Now the whole understanding of baptism has been a source of controversy and confusion among Christian churches over the centuries. And that confusion, I would suggest, is reduced to one phrase within the writings of the apostle Paul.

I have colleagues who are convinced Paul himself was just a confused man, but that is not what I am saying. The confusion comes from how we understand one phrase that Paul uses over and over again: “love of Christ,” in Greek *agape christou*, and more particularly the word “*Christou*” itself.

Baptism for the early church was a sign of the love of Christ present and alive in the individual life of a believer.

Seems obvious to me as a measurement for the potential baptized person, except in Greek that can mean one of two things:

Is Paul speaking of the love of Christ (subjective genitive) where Christ is the subject of that love, and so in English the phrase would more clearly be translated “Christ’s love for us,” or is this phrase “love of Christ” what linguistically is known as an “objective genitive,” and so means “the love that we have for Christ”?

If the latter is the primary meaning, then we would quite rightly say one must be an adult or at least a knowledgeable or mature believer in order to be baptized and become a full member of the church, for we need to be able to understand and articulate what loving Christ as an individual means to us.

If, however, the phrase refers to the love that Christ has for humanity, a symbol of God’s love for us from the very beginning of creation, then surely baptism can be something shared with all.

It is clear that Paul understands the phrase in the latter context, for he speaks of slaves and whole families being baptized, suggesting that one need not be seen as a mature adult in order to be baptized in his day.

Now why is it important to give this detailed theological argument, when most of us have far more significant issues to face, and more important struggles to grapple with? I am sure few of you came to church today to hear a sermon on the meaning of two words in the New Testament. Life is too precious and too important to get caught up in some kind of word game.

If that is what you are thinking right now, you are correct. And so when I suggest that the search for the true religion continues, it is because nothing in the Bible provides us with the answer to how true religion should be experienced and lived, without question, with absolute certainty. It is always a process of discovery that is underway with us, not a definitive answer given to us.

In the 1960's the United Church heard a report from a Commission on World Mission that spoke about the need not only to be open to the views and teachings of other Christian denominations, but also to be attuned to the teachings of other faiths.

That report led to the creation of the Division of World Mission, as opposed to Foreign Missions as they were previously identified, for we all are part of the world, and we share with other people in other lands what we seek to be as believers.

By the late 20th century the church started using the phrase "whole world ecumenism," indicating that the language of faith is not limited to Christians, but all people seek an understanding of how faith impacts their lives. Without stretching the point, even those who are self-avowed atheists speak about how faith – in their case a faith that does not include God or a higher being – impacts their lives.

Let me pause to point out that I am prepared for this talk on true religion by having all of the accessories any reasonable person would seek, right here in my "True Religion" bag. I have a dashboard Jesus in my possession, who shakes his head and body in a way that lets us know how rough the roads are around Sudbury; I have my "Sermonator" t-shirt that provides accreditation for what I say, but above all I have a new pair of jeans bought at the True Religion store in the Eaton Centre in Toronto – the source of my embossed True Religion bag.

When I heard of this store, I was determined to get a pair of jeans. And the fact the cheapest pair I could find in my size were \$208 plus tax did not deter me – I needed to experience True Religion in my life. A store wide sale of 25% off, given the fact it was boxing week, marginally cushioned the expense. I planned

to wear them today but it was not possible to find a place to get them shortened over the holidays. So instead they become a convenient prop as we seek “true religion” together.

I suspect the very name of the store is a play on our culture of 50 years ago or more. You see there was a time when “true religion” involved wearing gloves and hats for women, and freshly polished black oxfords for men with a tie and jacket.

True Religion today involves the opposite – a casual, functional look that does not connect to ritual, or so-called “Sunday clothes.”

Someone who has written a lot about religions – Christianity and others, and even penned a book entitled *A History of God*, is Karen Armstrong. In her latest book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, she actually dispels the idea that violence and wars can be reduced to religious beliefs and the power of religions. In fact, contrary to the sound of the title, she argues that we are violent people as part of our nature, and so any attempt to justify violence or terrorism as we have seen this week and too often in recent history, is not due to a religious perspective but due to our violent nature as human beings.

But what about violence and religious teachings, including the power of the jihadists within the Muslim community?

She points out that the word “jihad” is found only 41 times in the Quran, and most of those times refers to “struggle.” There are many things we can struggle over – struggle to find work or to find more time for family; struggle to eat healthily or have enough exercise; struggle to keep connection with friends or to find new opportunities for service.

In the Quran, and I would suggest probably for most of us regardless of our religious affiliation, the biggest struggle, the greatest jihad, is to reform our own community. We are much more effective, and certainly more certain, when we give advice to others as far as how they should act than we are to helping our own community decide on an effective and appropriate pathway for the future.

Armstrong argues that religion is not the source of violence; humans are. But religion is important because part of the human psyche is to seek and find meaning in life, and the development of religion was essential to that search. We believe life has meaning and a purpose, and so we develop the beliefs and rituals of religion.

In a recent Facebook post, the Rev. Lindsay King, a retired United Church minister who celebrates his 85th birthday next week (but you did not hear that from me) writes that the essence of true religion is not “orthodoxy” but “orthopraxy.”

So what does that mean? In simple terms, the search for true religion is not based on sharing our beliefs in such a way that they can be defended as a finely tuned philosophical or theological argument, using all of the properly defined words we can come up with, but rather true religion depends upon how we treat one another, look out for others, build community. Orthopraxy is doing what is right even when facing opposition in the doing of it.

True Religion is not what we do in our worship services or what we say we believe. True Religion is based on how we take those beliefs and interact with others in helpful, nurturing, transforming ways.

You do not need a dashboard Jesus or a pair of True Religion jeans to find a faith that can nurture you – but you need to look beyond what you have known to what you need to know in the future as the world shifts around you.

You see, true religion for us, true faith and commitment, is ultimately not about protecting what we have been, but being open to what we can and should be, as followers of Jesus Christ. As Jesus was called “God’s beloved,” so may we share that sense of being loved by God with all we meet.

May such true religion be ours for the sharing, now and always.