

Last atonement sermon

] As some of you know, this is my last Sunday before I move to New York and begin seminary at union theological seminary in NYC. This week, in between finishing work here and holding my niece Jarena, I've been taking part in an online class at union meant to introduce us to the seminary and some of the professors.

Each day, I've heard from a different professor about their field of study, followed by a time of question and answer. Some conversations have been interesting, some like those about biblical languages, a little boring to me.

On Wednesday, the dr. Daisy machado, a professor of church history who focuses on borderlands and the prosperity gospel spoke to us.

The conversation on Wednesday turned to how we remain Christian despite of the horrific history of Christianity and killings of others done in the name of Christ.

Dr. Machado responded, "I have a hard time when we just want to bash Christianity since humans as a whole suck"

I bring that in as we approach today's gospel and passage from James.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before god, the father, is this: to care for widows and orphan in their distress.

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. So, the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘this people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
In vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of god and hold to human tradition.”

To play off the words of Dr. Machado, I have a hard time when we just want to bash the Pharisees because humans as a whole suck.

Often times, Christians have approached the passages regarding the Pharisees in a quite anti-Semitic way, in a *well, at least we are not like the Pharisees* way. At least *we* have figured out this right religion thing, at least we no longer washing our cups and pots and bronze kettles (although please for the love of god, be washing your hands). At lease we are not like those Pharisees.

But the Pharisees are not within scripture to make us feel good about ourselves; to give us something to compare ourselves against, but rather can be used to illuminate what it looks like to struggle with how to live this pure religion in an ever-new context. What does it look like

today to abandon the commandment of god and to hold to human traditions? What does that look like for those of us here today?

And so, we realize that the religious life is not one where we can rest in our own certainty, in our own goodness, but calls us to once again look to see where we have abandoned the commandment of god and held onto human traditions. It calls us too to look where we are following the commandment of god and letting go of human tradition. It calls us to look at where the line becomes blurred between human tradition and the commandment of god.

We do not get to rest in the certainty that we are living into pure religion or pure faith because we are not. We cannot. We will not. And that is fine.

I was drawn this week to a twitter thread by a Jungian psychologist, Martha Crawford, that I follow. She was speaking about our desire to rest in our own certainty and righteousness in terms of the pandemic and our own pandemic behavior.

“I’m just saying that we are all messy, each of us, all of us, and this binary good and evil stuff is horseshit. Everyone yearning for simple, clear, concrete moral binaries to save them in the midst of a whirlwind. We will all be tempted to grasp at a falsehood and cling to it, to demand that it be true until we are forced to come to terms with the uncertainty of it all. We are a messy, confused, reactive, frightened, aggressive species and we are most dangerous when we are certain.”

We are most dangerous when we are certain. We are most dangerous when we are certain that we have this pure religion figured out, that we have somehow managed to perfectly live into caring for the orphans and widows. We are most dangerous when we have figured out for certain who is a good person and who is a bad person. We are most dangerous when we have figured out for certain if we are a good person or a bad person. All of that is dangerous. It denies those who we have categorized as good or bad their full humanity and it denies us our full humanity.

In the words of Luther, we are all simultaneously sinners and we saints. We are fully both. We are fully living into the commandments of god and following human tradition.

We are allowed to be wrong, to claim that we thought we were living into pure religion, but we realize now we were not. We are allowed to recalibrate, to confess to repent, to return. We do not have to rest only in our own goodness; we do not have to rest only in our own badness.

But friends, that is okay. We are not saved by our own goodness; we are not saved by our own badness. We are not saved by the concrete moral binaries we have fashioned for ourselves.

We are saved by the one whose friends were certain was dead.

We are saved by the uncertainty of those three days.

We are saved by Christ, fully human and fully god

We are saved by Christ, who is seated at the right hand of god and harrowing hell.

We are saved by Christ, who once met us in the garden and is now mistaken for the gardener.

Christ comes to meet us not in our certainty that we are good and are not in need of redemption, but in our full humanity. Christ comes to meet us not in our certainty that we are bad and irredeemable, but in our full humanity.

And that, dear ones, is good news.