

Nearly ten years ago, I took a professional detour: I became a beverage director. I could abide its 2 a.m. accounting for the delight of crafting a cocktail program. I shaved freshly foraged fungi on shaken quinoa vodka and honey, and played with the viscosity of a syrup so the swirled mix traced the interior of the glass like the legs of a well-aged Bordeaux. I reduced berries, balsamic and herbs to offer the equal and attractive alternative. Spirits were designed to be medicinal, even a little playful, to pique the palate, ease digestion, lubricate social exchanges. Crafting and mixing beverages is variation on that fairytale Goldilocks theme: not too boozy, not too sweet, not too much... but just right. My professional life's moved on, but the art of the cocktail still serves as a favorite metaphor for the spiritual life. What is the cocktail that piques our palate for God's presence, makes us ready to feast and vibrant as social body? The flavor of this lived out, balanced spiritual life or "true religion" is the subject of today's readings, and its multiple opinions.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees and scribes, representatives of the Jerusalem Temple and the surrounding region, question Jesus about a violation of ritual purity: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?" We might hear something like "You're not following our rules." But recall that many of these 'rules', more rightly, these teachings, are explicit in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, Tradition with a capital-T.

By contrast, Mark's Jesus has only been in the Galilee, away from the Jerusalem Temple and its power. So, Jesus appeals to the prophet Isaiah, who in his own day challenged Jerusalem. Quoting from a text that was common to Jews who stayed abroad after the exile Jesus says: "in vain do they worship me, they abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

At first blush, Jesus seems to deal a mortal blow to ritual purity or observance As if to say to modern Orthodox Jews: "Have a bacon cheeseburger, God doesn't care." Or to us: "Do whatever feels right if and when you come to church; the 'rules' that make your prayer common don't *really* matter." Except we know our common prayer is more than instructions. Like the Judean's ritual washing, it is a source of our identity, a bond of affection among us, and before God. Like the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs,

used in the Jewish Sabbath liturgy, our worship life is one human tradition's faithful response, to the call to arise, to be swept up in the song of God's love, to blossom in God's embrace.

Where is God's call in today's Gospel? First, God's call is to order our spiritual life. Roman Catholic New Testament Scholar John Meier¹ investigates the history of this passage, and surmises that if the historical Jesus had actually dismissed the whole foundation of Judaism, the Scribes and Pharisees would have responded. Instead, they simply vanish from the scene. It's more likely that Jesus was interpreting the priorities of the tradition: Prioritize virtue —habits of the heart then ritual observance.

Second, God's call is to a community of wholeness, for everyone, religious insiders and outsiders, without exception. We are marred only by the ways we degrade or dehumanize one another. Theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman writes: "[Jesus] recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them."²

Out of the heart are the issues of life. We may be thoroughly overwhelmed by what James' Epistle terms the "rank growth of wickedness" that pervades our public life. We may feel ill-equipped to effect real or lasting social change. But we, as God's people in this place, can be stewards and growers of that spirit against which wickedness will not prevail. Not by lashing out, but looking in, and doing "true religion" from the heart.

True religion is curious, it expects the unexpected from God. It pushes the ritual life to wonder and wander, and the bounds of the community to include. It listens for the heart of faithfulness, and like Jesus, knows that practice on the margins is at least as true and God-revealing as that from the center.

¹ John P Meier, "The Historical Jesus and Purity," *Joint Sessions of the "Historical Jesus" and "Jewish-Christian Relations" Task Forces, Catholic Biblical Association of America. St. John, MN: August, 2005, sec. 8 and 11.*

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Reprint edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.

This Friday, I visited Oakland's Qal'bu Maryam, the second women's mosque to open in the U.S. The mosque's founding Imam, Rabi'a Keeble departs from the prevailing wisdom that the community should be women-only, women-led. Her concern is that all people, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender identity, learn to pray and lead as equals together. I visited for the inauguration of their new space, as a non-Muslim and a woman, I naturally lingered toward the back of the prayer rugs. The imam turned and invited me to step forward. I was deeply touched by her gesture because I knew it broke all manner of norms. It was virtue first, then ritual observance. Who can you, who can we invite forward, into our center today? And whose foreign faithfulness will reveal something of God to us?

If true religion is curious, true virtue is practical. It knows that perfection belongs to God, and persistence to human kind. Virtue knows that its aim is a character of love. True virtue does not blossom in an idea, but in doable actions. One weeknight dinner in July, our household was enjoying unusual fare, as everyone was eating meat. The older son, temporarily omnivorous, set the date when he would revert to being pescatarian. I was struck by his clarity and wondered aloud, "Why eat meat just for the summer?" He replied with a careful account of balancing the energy required to be a counselor in training biking five miles per day to camp, and chasing after seven-year-olds; with his distress at how factory farming harms animals and the environment.

This account has stuck with me in my own practical balance-seeking. I'm reminded that virtue isn't our 'perfection.' Virtue is God's gift received and ours given again in response: the implanted word blossoming and our conscious craft of our best selves.

The implanted word, God's gift is blossoming. How do you craft your spiritual cocktail for balanced response? This week, how can you keep the ingredients fresh, the flavors complementary, the volume fitting the glass? True virtue and true religion, that balanced spiritual cocktail, prime us to love better: God, one another, the whole creation.

Today, may our palates be primed to feast on the Word Made Flesh, who nurtures our social body, who heals and eases and delights.

Today, may our faithful practices prime us for the voice of the beloved, that upon hearing, together, we arise.