

“GIMME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A Sermon by John Thomason

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Ash Wednesday

The song referenced in my sermon title, *Gimme That Old Time Religion*, has an interesting pedigree. It dates back to the year 1873 and represents a mixture of two musical traditions: the black spiritual and the white gospel song. It became a standard in many Protestant hymnals, although it says nothing about Jesus or the Christian message. Perhaps for that reason, it became a cover song for many secular artists, including Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan. It has also appeared in movies like *Sergeant York*, *Inherit the Wind*, and – if you can believe this – *Beneath the Valley of the Ultra-Vixens*!

For those of you who are life-long New Englanders, this piece of Southern gospel music may be vaguely familiar, but its message may be foreign and even offensive to you. “Gimme that old time religion, gimme that old time religion, gimme that old time religion, it’s good enough for me.”

Growing up in the Bible Belt as I did, those lyrics conjured up images of week-long revival meetings, fire-breathing preachers, and a strict, no-nonsense approach to the Christian life. That old time religion was hot gospel evangelism and a private morality with little reference to social concern; it was “don’t drink, don’t dance, don’t chew, and don’t go with the girls who do”; it was singing gospel songs in pews that were racially segregated. As a child, I found those expressions of faith to be sufficient, because they were all I knew.

But as I spread my wings to other parts of the country and gained a wider understanding of Christianity, that old time religion was not good enough for me. I wanted and needed something more, something newer, more contemporary, more relevant and truthful. I imagine you do as well, so this old spiritual may be fun to tap your feet to, but otherwise a bit of a turn-off.

And yet, one hears echoes of this song in our two Scripture lessons for Ash Wednesday. Both the prophet Joel and a later, more famous prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, are saying in so many words, “Gimme that old time religion.” They’re saying that they once had something of value in their faith tradition that has been lost and needs to be recovered.

But in asking for that old time religion, they’re not talking about a return to what is old-fashioned and therefore likely to be outmoded. They’re not on a nostalgia trip like some Christians are today, pining for the “good ol’ days” when all moral issues were black and white, when the pews were packed with worshipers, when preachers focused on “the sweet bye and bye” and churches sang the old hymns that everybody knows and loves. No, Joel and Jesus are appealing for a return to the essence of their faith, a return to true religion as opposed to counterfeit religion. Over the centuries, the religion of God’s people has become like a ship that has gotten covered with barnacles, changing its appearance and character and performance, and not in good ways. Now, these barnacles need to be removed so that the ship’s original form is uncovered and the ship is free to sail smoothly to its proper destination.

At first glance, the barnacles of religion look harmless; in fact, they seem to add to the beauty and strength of the ship. The barnacles are identified in our two texts as outward acts of piety – all of the ways people practice their religion, in synagogues and churches, in their homes and on the streets. And there is nothing inherently wrong with practicing one’s religion. God expects people to worship, to pray, to serve and give generously to others.

However, both Joel and Jesus claim that the practice of religion has been corrupted. Outward acts of piety are now being used not to honor God, but to impress other people. Back in ancient Israel, folks were easily impressed by someone’s regular attendance at worship or lavish benevolence toward people in need, which could send the person who is religiously observant on a real ego trip.

This is hardly our temptation today, especially in post-Christian Connecticut. When you and I engage in outward acts of piety, no one notices or cares. If they do notice, they may simply write us off as practitioners of old time religion. Which is why our temptation is not to show off our religiosity but to hide it under a bushel. What would my neighbors think if they saw me sneaking off to church on a Sunday morning?

Joel and Jesus also note that outward acts of piety are being used as a substitute for true religion. For Joel, true religion is not about external forms; it is about internal transformation. “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:12-13a). Likewise, for Jesus, true religion is not about the little, petty things – loving every jot and tittle of the Jewish Law; it is about the big things – loving God and loving one’s neighbor. But Jesus, too, knows that such love doesn’t come naturally to any of us. What you and I require is an “inside job,” and only God can work from the inside. And yet, religion as most of us know it and practice it is often focused only on the externals: Did someone remember to change the paraments to purple for Lent? Is the music too loud or too soft? Did we balance the church budget?

The Catholic spiritual writer Richard Rohr has an interesting theory about why many of our contemporaries are so dismissive of organized religion. He notes that unchurched people are often looking for inner transformation. Why else would they read self-help books or watch *Dr. Phil* or do yoga? They might not use this term, but what they are really seeking is “spirituality” – a connection with Someone or something bigger than themselves that will change how they feel on the inside and how they behave on the outside. But they don’t expect to find such spirituality in the Church. They’re not expecting to find Christian lives to be any better than their own lives. They perceive the Church to be preoccupied with rituals and doctrines, arguing over proper procedures and correct beliefs, while the world goes to hell in a hand basket.

I’ve always been moved by Cardinal Cushing’s story about his time of service as a chaplain in World War I. He was called one day to comfort a soldier who had been mortally wounded. The chaplain knelt beside the soldier and asked him, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” The soldier replied, “Here I am dying, and you’re asking me riddles.”

Lest you and I forget, Ash Wednesday is not an observance designed for the non-religious. Wouldn’t it be peachy if we could say to the Wall Street titan or the Hollywood tycoon, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”? Wouldn’t it be convenient if we could say to the corrupt politician or common criminal, “Repent, and believe the gospel”? But Ash Wednesday is not for them, it’s for us; it is a call to repentance for the Church. It’s an invitation

to recite the words to another old time spiritual: “Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” Those of us who churched need to repent just as much as those who are unchurched – perhaps even more so, because we should know better what true religion is. According to its best witnesses, true religion is not just being respectable and proper; it’s not merely looking good on the outside; true religion is living a life that has been transformed by God from the inside out.

If you and I demonstrate that transformation, people will be impressed, and for all the right reasons. They won’t be impressed by us, but by what God has done to us and through us. And seeing that, they may actually give the Church a second look and choose to join us. As one of the 12-Step traditions says, our fellowship will grow by attraction, not promotion. “If we live it, they will come.” As the pagans said about the early Christians, “See how they love one another,” and new converts flocked into the churches.

Friends, “Gimme that old time religion, it’s good enough for me.”