Sunday, March 27, 1977
TRUE OR FALSE?
Mark 9:38-41; Matthew 7:15-23

It doesn't take very long for a group of people who have some success to become very cocky and exclusive. This happened to the 12 disciples whom Jesus had chosen to follow him. And it can happen to us.

The disciples had seen Jesus heal people. They had seen him cast out demons. They themselves had had some success in doing such things. And they had some failures. Overall, however, they were feeling quite proud of their preferred status. Jesus was becoming famous, and they were part of the inner circle. They expected to have privileged positions in the coming Kingdom. They had even had some discussions among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest. Jesus found out about that conversation and said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Then one day not long after the discussion about who was the greatest among them., John brought another problem to Jesus. He said, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name and we told him to stop doing it because he was not part of our group." It was another way of saying, "This person has not been approved by us. He does not have a license to practice religion in your name. We have not given him the test. We don't know if he has the correct theology. This thing could get out of hand and pretty soon we'll lose our preferred status. We've got to get some control over things like this." Perhaps also, the disciples were jealous of this person's success because not long before this incident they had tried to cast out a demon and failed.

In their report to Jesus about this person, the disciples were also implying a question, namely, "How does one determine if a religious movement or person is valid?" How can we tell true religion from false religion? It's an important question. In this case, Jesus said. to the disciples, "Do not forbid this man from doing his good work." If he is truly carrying on a ministry in my name, then even though he's not part of our particular group, he's doing God's work. God's Spirit cannot be controlled or fenced in by any one person or any one church or group.

This does not mean that everyone who claims to be doing God's good work is doing so. In another instance, Jesus warned his disciples that there are always false religious movements around, false prophets who lead people astray. In the second part of our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." And he went on to say, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord'shall enter the Kingdom of God." In other words, not everyone who says he or she is doing work in the name of Christ is necessarily doing so.

This morning then, let's look at this matter of true religion and false religion and how we can begin to tell one from the other.

1. First, let's admit that we, like the disciples, can easily become too exclusive and think that nobody else can do God work except our kind of people and our kind of church. The Quakers have been to1d many times by other Christians, "This will never do."

Not only in religion is this a problem, but it happens in all professions and in other aspects of life as well. The spirit of narrow sectarianism is familiar enough in literature and art. Painters

and poets, sculptors and novelists who do not follow us, have been sternly reprimanded by the authorities of the time. In the history of medicine, we see the same thing. “That doctor could not possibly be helping people get well because he’s not following us.”

In the church we hear it all the time. Unless one is born again according to our method, he or she cannot really be a Christian. Unless one takes the same view of the Bible that we do, that person cannot really be a Christian. Unless one is baptized by immersion, he or she has not really been baptized at all. And on it goes. We think we can limit God’s working within the limits we set.

But Jesus said to the disciples in this instance, “Do not forbid him!” Take a wide view of your faith instead of a narrow one. The followers of Jesus are not to be a little clique off in a corner fenced in. The kingdom of God has the dimensions of God himself. Those who do the works of Jesus belong to him. Do not look for labels. Look for actions, attitudes, spirit.

It’s the testimony of the Bible that God often works in surprising ways and through people or movements which we might least expect. These words of Jesus then are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions that God’s actions in the world are limited to the forms with which we are familiar. The demons of the world are cast out in many ways.

2. But note secondly, Jesus also said, “Beware of false prophets,” and “Not everyone who uses my name is doing my work.”

There are always plenty of false religious movements around wanting our allegiance. Many of these cults attract more young people than anything else. If you are confused about just who you are and what you are supposed to be doing with your life, and if you are often anxious about what people think of you and whether or not you mean anything to them; then you might be very attracted to a group of people who tell you they have five simple rules for being happy and if you keep the rules they will love you forever. False religions provide simple answers to the complex problems of life at a time when simple answers seem most desirable.

Any time of rapid change is one in which a huge surplus of emotional energy has piled up to the point at which it must find an object and so religious fads multiply in times like ours. Furthermore, churches like ours have not always done a very good job of presenting the Christian faith. And G.K. Chesterton remarked somewhere that if a person is unschooled in classical Christianity, the danger is not that he will believe in nothing, but that he will believe in anything. The truth of that is demonstrated in our own time.

Almost daily we read in the newspapers about some of these cults. A recent article in Seventeen Magazine was entitled, “Why I Quit the Moon Cult.” This is a movement called the Unification Church whose leader is a Korean, Sun Myung Moon, whose followers claim he is Jesus Christ returned.

The “boy-god” Guru Maharaj-ji and his Divine Light Mission was very popular for a time. His followers described him as the incarnation of God.

The religious fads are many and the vocabulary of these pop theologies is significant, for language is an index of the quality of thought. The followers of these false religions of ten describe themselves as “blissed out.” Their evaluation of spiritual experience, “a trip” is often limited to, “Wow, oh, wow!” Stephen Gaskin, guru of The Farm, in Tennessee, says, “People who hang out in my aura get used to it being a certain way.”

Scientology, Children of God, Hare Krishna, Mind Dynamics, and more — the cults are endless. Voltaire knew what he was talking about when he said, “If you are desirous of obtaining a great name, of becoming the founder of a sect or establishment, be completely mad; but be sure your madness corresponds with the turn and temper of the age. Have in your madness reason enough to guide your extravagances; do not forget to be excessively opinionated and obstinate. It is certainly possible you may get hanged; but if you escape, you will have altars erected to you.”

We might add, if you are hanged in effigy, so much the better, since that will increase your royalties while leaving you still around to enjoy them.

No wonder Jesus warned us to “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

How then are we to distinguish between true religion and false religion? Some of the usual tests we might use for other enterprises are not sufficient. Merely because a group claims to have a special revelation from God and is fast growing and quite successful as far as raising money, is no test of its truth. Nor can we take the easy way out and say simply that if religious needs are being met, then what’s going on must be all right. We can meet our religious needs in perverted ways.

3. This means thirdly, that we...some help, some guidelines, some measurements in order to tell the true from the false. The Bible gives a number of these. In the Old Testament, the prophets remind us, “What does the Lord require of you? To love mercy, to do justice and to walk humbly with your God.” That’s why Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits.” And St. Paul reminded the church in Galatia when the people there were wondering how to tell the true from the false, he said, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Paul was saying, “If God’s Spirit truly dwells in you, this is the kind of person you will be.” And there are other tests suggested and implied in the Bible which help us determine the true from the false.

For example, it is the witness of the Bible and the Christian faith that God’s Spirit calls us to wholeness and to seeing the world and creation as whole, as being interdependent, as working toward harmony. Therefore, true religion is that in which the followers do their best to love their enemies and treat all people, even those who disagree with them, with respect.

The followers of true religion also therefore see all people everywhere as their brothers and sisters. Our family is the human race. It is more than just those who live in the same household, or in the same town, or state, or nation.

On the other hand, it is the witness of the Bible that those movements religious or otherwise, those leaders which would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism are not God’s Spirit, but false.

It is also the witness of the Bible and our Christian faith that life is good, and God’s creation is good, and it is to be enjoyed, but not wasted or plundered. True religion teaches a reverence and respect for the total environment. Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

True religion is that which fills one's life with joy, wonder and mystery. W. are happy because we know this is ultimately God's creation and that God loves us and the whole world. And we know that all things work together for the good for those who love God.

This means that the followers of true religion are free. We are not afraid to doubt. We are not afraid of seeking and finding more truth. We know we do not know everything there is to know. We are always open to new possibilities.

A person who is filled with true religion is one in which there is victory over self-centered habits that we have been a slave to. The follower of true religion is one whose whole life bears a new tone, a new outlook; where fear is banished and where human relationships are healthy.

And one of the most basic tests of all — take notice how a religious movement and how its followers treat the outcasts of society, those in trouble, the poor, the down-and-out, those in prison, the cripples, the retarded, the persecuted. That's the way Jesus said that God separates the sheep from the goats, the true from the false. God doesn't ask us who's our favorite guru, or if we've had a spiritual experience. "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

Not only are these tests for checking out many of the re-ligious fads in our time, but they also are to be applied to our own church and to ourselves as individuals. True or False?

True religion is not primarily rules or definitions nor is it primarily ethics or morals. It is not an escape from the world. Rather it helps us live with the joyous world view which JESUS came to bring us and which is validated in the Resurrection. The goal is to increase in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and other people. We begin to live eterna1 life here and now. Amen.