

Authenticity (Part Two)

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen?”

Reflection 11 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

What Millennials want, in fact, what most people want, from church as from elsewhere is authenticity, the church being real, being genuine. It’s also what Jesus taught. It’s what Jesus said that last week in Jerusalem before his death in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, now in Matthew 25:31-46. From Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundations. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
 I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
 I was homeless and you gave me a room,
 I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
 I was sick and you stopped to visit,
 I was in prison and you came to me.’

Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me.’ “Then he will turn to the ‘goats’ ...

It’s Jesus saying to us today: That little girl laying down at night on that small pallet in a hut in the Sudan, her father killed by government militia, now trying to fight off gnawing hunger pangs, I want you to feed her. She’s me.

That woman, a mother, rail-thin, gaunt, her hair streaked white, aged beyond her years, walking miles each day to the only well that gives safe drinking water, I want you to give her something to drink. She’s me.

That little boy in Liberia whose sister died of Ebola, and then his brother, and then his mother, and then his father, until he alone is left, I want you to see that he’s taken care of. He’s me.

And it’s all a matter of authenticity, of not just worshipping Jesus but of following Jesus, not just believing some doctrines about him, but doing what he says. And people see this. Particularly Millennials. Millennials have strong truth detectors. There’s another word for this that I’ll leave to your imagination. But they know when Christians aren’t following Jesus. They know when Christians in their defensiveness betray the trust they claim. They know when Christians evade the tough questions. They know when Christians demonize others, when Christians slander

others. They notice moral scandals. They recognize clichés and platitudes. They're looking for specifics. What are you doing about the poor and the needy and those who are oppressed and exploited? No, specifically, what are you doing? They sniff out duplicity, how church leaders take strong stands on various issues until their sons or daughters, or maybe they themselves, personally face the issue. They catch it when Christians selectively use Scripture, when Christians pick and choose from the very same texts what they will take seriously and what they will ignore. And when patterns of prejudice and discrimination are still sanctioned as "the will of God," many of them just walk off.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion* notes that more and more people today see something as 'true and trustworthy [when] it springs from good motives and praiseworthy intentions, with results that prove to increase happiness and make peoples' lives better' (p. 115). I like that. I think it makes sense. It's essentially only another way to state the Golden Rule – doing to others what you would want done to yourself.

And all of this stuff you know or you could know! If we turned off the voices of hatred that cloud our minds and coarsen our hearts. We know if we're acting in ways that are kind and compassionate, caring and humane. We know if we're loosening the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing our food with the hungry and providing shelter for those without shelter. We know if we're acting justly and loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. And we know if our nation is.

And so I love this story about John Kasich, Republican governor of Ohio, who has fought to take care of a lot of poor people in his state. To one person who challenged him on this, he said, "I respect the fact that you believe in small government. I do, too. I also know that you're a person of faith. Now, when you die and get to the meeting with St. Peter, he's probably not going to ask much about what you did about keeping government small. But he is going to ask you what you did for the poor. You better have a good answer" (Salon.com/2014/10/31).

Meanwhile back in Isaiah 58, verse 8, the great prophet describes what happens when we act authentically, when our actions line up with our worship, when we loosen the chains of injustice and set the oppressed and exploited free:

"Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call,
and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help,
and he will say: Here I am.
If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday.”

For this we were born. To do away with the yoke of oppression and the pointing finger and malicious talk. To spend ourselves on behalf of the hungry. To satisfy the needs of the oppressed. This is where authenticity takes us. And our light will break forth like the dawn.

– Dale Pauls