

The Collect of the Day is as good a place to start as any. In it, we ask for several different things. First, we ask that God graft in our hearts the love of his name, and I'll get to what that rather archaic language means in a minute. Second, we ask that God increase in us true religion, whatever that is, and, third, that he ". . . nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works . . ." In other words, the result loving his name and of true religion ought to be good works.

Today's gospel seems to me to focus on the last element of the sequence and put the earlier ones in second place. In fact, if I could get into a bit of an argument with Jesus, or, to be more critically correct, with Mark's interpretation of Jesus, I'd say there's very little that one finds inside a person which has not, in some sense, also come from outside. We may shape who we are, but only God creates something out of nothing, even in our inner lives. So that which comes out of us, is that which has been given to us **and** shaped in our inner lives. Jesus is certainly not claiming that human beings create themselves. He's not even talking about being a self-made person in the realm of morality. To believe he is, is the danger of an unconsidered interpretation of this passage.

Jesus is contrasting two attitudes toward relationships. Let me see if I can communicate this – I'm not sure I can. One attitude says: the heart of things is fixed and relationships need to live up to the fixed nature of things. Therefore, relationships are according to "these" specific rules. The interpretation of rules can be thought about, bounced around, but our connectedness comes from this structure of rule, whatever it is. There is another way of thinking about relationships which sees them as much more organic. They grow. All ruled patterns for relating are approximations. In terms of the spiritual life, this means that there are no cookie cutters. Even psychological categories remain approximations, and what one is doing, for instance, in spiritual direction, is more like creating a work of art than corresponding to a set pattern. The spiritual life is not a matter of painting by numbers. You get a recognizable picture that way, painting by numbers, but in the process very little of the self is transferred to the painting. The Christian moral life is not intended to make you obedient (attitude one toward relationships), it is to enable you to love (attitude two towards relationships).

Obedience, without a thoughtful rooting in love, easily creates a wasteland. And that's why, before we're nourished by goodness and produce the fruit of good works, the collect asks that the love of God be grafted into our hearts. Usually, in The Book of Common Prayer, (which pays real attention to the relation between meaning and style) you will find things listed in the order of their importance. If you have a sequence of three things, either the most important will come first, or the one which is logically foundational will come first. I'd suggest this is why, in ecclesiastical processions, the cross precedes the clergy. OK? The cross comes first and, as that passes, standard Episcopalian good manners indicate a bow. Now you certainly don't need to bow when the rector passes, although I've seen it done. These ceremonies, which easily become empty, were designed to illustrate pretty important points about life in the Christian community. The important point here, the primacy of the cross, of self-sacrificing love over hierarchy, is acknowledged by the cross's preceding the clergy, whose job is to point to it, not supplant it.

So, what we have in the collect is an ordered sequence in which the most important point is mentioned first: “Graft in our hearts the love of your name.” In the first part of the collect, which talks about the nature of God, before we get to what we’re asking God to do because of this nature, it says, “Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things . . .” The question then is, “What are the good things which God gives?” And the first good thing which God gives is the capacity to love him. That’s the first good thing and all other goods are dependent on that.

Now, it’s not just any love. I’ve known people, they seem relatively rare, who are quite capable of loving God as an idea or abstraction. I’ve known people who have loved humanity in the same way. They’re usually pretty horrible. If they are remarkable for drive or intelligence, it can be utterly disastrous. For instance, the most recent gift to the LaVerne Goman library was a large bag of scholarly material on the Marxist-Leninist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. If you want to understand 20th century theology you cannot ignore the Communist Movement. If you do, you are a fool. The interplay between Christianity and Communism is crucial. We may not know this, isolated in our basement at the corner of 26th, Monroe and Arnold Way in Corvallis, but understood in terms of the wide, wide world, that confrontation is crucial. I would merely point out that the world’s loss of interest in Communism and in Christianity are somewhat parallel. Both are movements of immense imagination, daring to posit goals for the human race as a whole, daring to think in terms of salvation rather than individual achievement. The fact that we’re not paying much attention to either says some important and sinister things about us.

So, I’m glad to have this literature in our library. It belongs. But in both Christianity and Communism the temptation is to say that people should be subordinate to the cause. Then, by increments, one begins to justify doing more and more horrible things to people for the sake of the cause. This is what happens when an ability to love abstractions more than people comes uppermost. The person to watch out for is one of deeply held principle, but sparing in love for individuals.

In this collect the phrase “the love of your name” is key. It tells us that we aren’t to love just the idea of God, the theology about God, the generalities or abstractions of God, but what is to be loved is the unique, personal, entity encountered in this particular God. I think I’ve mentioned before that one of the peculiarities of Christianity, not so much in the Episcopal Church, but in some of our close relatives, is that people are always harping about a personal relationship with God. At which point I put down my book, (Prayerbook or whatever it is.), take off my glasses, fold my hands, gaze into the heavens with pseudo-devotion, and say, “And what is the name of this God with whom I’m supposed to have a personal relationship?” Jesus? That’s not orthodox. In Orthodox Christianity, God, understood merely as Jesus, is not complete. That’s what the Trinity is about. The word “God” is a general word which covers a lot of ground. In the New Testament, we find the statement that there are gods many and lords many. The question is, which one of the many are you attached too? To the Almighty? Sounds like a title, not a name. In English, we don’t have a personal name for the God we worship. We have to go to Judaism to get a name for the God with whom we’re to have a personal relation, a relation of naming.

So there's tremendous irony in this: being asked to have a personal relationship with that for which we have no personal name. Yet, to the extent we allow the abstract to substitute for the personal, we begin getting into something you'll probably recognize from your personal lives: I love you because, I don't just love you. I occasionally see this with parents and children: I love you because you're successful or I'll love you if you become what I'd like you to be. And between husbands and wives: I'll love you if you meet my needs; I'll love you if you sacrifice yourself to my career; I'll love you if you meet some abstract standard or achieve a particular goal.

Then what's loved, the person or the success? The person or the goals? The person or the needs? I'll love you, as long as you live up to my standards. What's loved, the person or the standards? Well, it's a bit more complex than that, but my point is made.

So, love of the name of God is an old fashioned, biblical way of saying love of the personal. It says nothing complimentary about humanity if we love God because he's powerful. That's the love of a slave for the master who can beat him. How much credit can we give ourselves for that kind of deference? Or, do we love God because he's good? Same problem. I think the Song of Solomon comes a little closer to where we need to be. We love God because God is lovely. And no two lovely things are exact copies: people, flowers, mountains, ideas, generous deeds, courageous actions, wise insights, artistic creations or deep dish apple pies. That's not talked about much in the United States, we've still got this interesting Puritan heritage which is suspicious of anything non-utilitarian, anything lovely in and for itself. Yet loveliness in and of itself comes as close as we can get to what God is about. It's why human love, at it's best, is the best model we can have for divine love. I have yet to meet anyone who simply deserved to be fully loved for the characteristics of his or her personality. Sorry about that, but it's true. Described objectively, we're pretty difficult people to tolerate. This doesn't stop us, if we're fortunate, from loving each other more than we deserve. And we hope that that's what goes on between members of Christian communities as it is what goes on between God and us. But it doesn't go on unless we know that's what we're doing, that we are loving each other more than any of us deserve or have a right to expect. After all, what would happen to us if we got what we deserved? I invite your lengthy reflection on that at some future period. But I don't think we'd get very much.

And so the love which goes beyond deserving, which goes beyond categories, which goes beyond earning, is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian life. It is the foundational gift from God, the love of his name, of himself as a unique personal entity, of his personhood, of the foundational loveliness of reality.

That's what the Christian life is about. And, of course, we go at it backwards and get what we deserve. We get children who detest Sunday School because Sunday School is understood as a means for making them good. What we need to do is have them play with paint, or with clay, to make something which expresses themselves. This is far closer to what a relationship with God is about. Have them play an instrument or sing if that's their thing. Take them on an adventure. Give them something which helps them care.

Comment: But we're asking God to give us the ability to love him, carrying the implication that

we can't love him without that gift?

Yes, but that also needs to be understood in context. That's a nice thing about theology: it's like grabbing an eel, it can slip in just about any direction, depending on how you squeeze it.

I do see the force of your observation. My response is that I can't be anything without gifts. I don't exist without them. I didn't think up myself. So the fact that we have to ask God for this kind of love doesn't bother me, because to pray for something is not necessarily to imply that it isn't there, but to acknowledge the fact that what's there is a gift. And gifts of this kind, gifts which define our being, are frequently things which need to keep on being given to us. I don't maintain the spiritual life simply because it was given to me when I was four and after that I only work with the original deposit. The capacity for spiritual life is something which is constantly being given to me, so to ask for it, in a self-conscious way, is not only, on one hand, a way of acknowledging the gift, but, on the other, of reminding me that the gift is being constantly given.

Such prayer is also a way of increasing our capacity to receive. That which I am conscious of being given I can sometimes receive more wholly than that which has to push its way into me past my unawareness.

Many parents experience a feeling of relief when their children begin to recognize what they've been given. That relief isn't because the parent says, "Ah. I'm finally getting the recognition I deserve." It comes because we know that the child's utilization of the gift will be more complete as the gift is recognized and appreciated.

That's how I'd respond. We can develop that more later – coffee hour – if you wish. But the key thing is that I'm not much bothered that I lack the capacity to love God in and of myself. When I'm feeling particularly autonomous, I may be irked by the fact that I'm made up of gifts, but my autonomy is usually satisfied by my knowledge that no one else combines those gifts in the way I do. The gifts in themselves may come from somewhere else, but the combination and processing of them are mine alone, and the good done by the gifts is utterly unique

Well, just one or two other small points. First, this business about true religion. The people who wrote this collect believed that false religion was a possibility. This is important since I run into people who don't believe false religion possible. And I constantly hear statements which claim all religions to be the same, down at the bottom. And my answer is no, they certainly are not. Even a religion which I'm quite willing to acknowledge has good things to say and is worthy of our attention, a religion upon which a profound human life can be based, is not saying the same thing as Christianity and Christianity isn't saying the same thing as Buddhism or Vedanta Hinduism.

Does that mean that one is true and one false? Not at all. That's like saying that because two + two is four, and apples cannot be green, they have to be four. If you're talking about different things, of course you need to use different languages and different concepts. This idea that all religions are the same at the bottom deeply restricts the possibilities for and richness of human spiritual life.

For what it's worth, here's my own take on this. I don't believe any religion very much. Why? They are all more or less wrong as well as somewhat right. So the important thing is not to find out which one is right or wrong, but whether or not they understand each other. I want to be able to talk with my religious neighbor and have the discussion make sense. With understanding comes the capacity to create – and we're not done creating religion. Look at the history of Christian thought and you see one of the most flexible, creative intellectual stories in the world's history, a story of change from the beginning, from Jesus's reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition, until today. I don't know where we got the idea we're believing the same thing the apostles were believing. From the standpoint of the intellectual historian, that's ludicrous. There are traceable, organic, patterns of growth and connection. Simply because we can't believe as a 1st century person would doesn't mean we cannot understand something of that 1st century person. There is a unity between ourselves and them, but it is a dynamic unity, not a static one. To be a Christian means, in love, to explore the dynamic reality of our relationship with God. It does not mean to think or act in the same way as those first century people. Unless one is a master at self-deception, one can't. There's no way a modern 21st century American can be a first century Jew. One can understand a bit what a first century Jew was about, you can trace connections between him and us. You may even be able to find a few notions which tie us together. What we can't do is imitate him.

So what's true religion? Now I'm going to get contradictory, but Christianity isn't terribly common-sensical, so that's all right. If you say people are saved by means of an execution, (majority of Christians) that's not common sense. The key is that true religion means (for us Christians) to imitate Jesus. But we must ask, "Who did Jesus imitate? Can we imitate Jesus by imitating Jesus?" Paradoxically, we can't. He didn't imitate. If we copy Jesus, we're afraid of the possibility that we may do something which hasn't been done before. Jesus wasn't afraid of that. So to imitate him is not to copy him, but to participate in that originality in the formation of a relation with God that he pioneered. That's why the decline of the use of art in our Christianity is spiritually dangerous. Art is the expression of the uniqueness of vision held by an individual, but shared with, and giving meaning to, a community. That's what needs to be going on in the love of God which leads to true religion – this expression of a relationship with God shared with a community and a recognition that the sharing with the community helps with the development of our relationship with God.

That's the foundation. Here we have it: First the love of God, then true religion, based on the living out of that love. This is where the Pharisees in today's gospel go wrong. The gospel ends on a negative point, I guess I can too. That's what you get for imitation.

The important thing to realize is that the Pharisees also wanted a personal relation with God. They did not fall into the trap of thinking that rules were all there were. But they did think that the way to a relationship with God was to do what God wanted. Therefore, you keep the rules. But a relationship based on doing what God wants is not quite the same thing as developing a relationship of love. I love a lot of people and don't necessarily do what they want. Now it's a strange thing to apply that to God. But if we spend our lives trying to do what God wants and assuming that love will develop out of that, then I think we miss the Song of Solomon. In doing what God wants there is a risk of the loss of delight. Maybe at the end of spiritual life, we can discover that we delight in what God wants because he wants it. But for most of us that's not

where we can begin. We have to begin with delight itself. Whether it's in a field of wildflowers or a well puffed souffle, or a skilled bridge game probably doesn't make too much difference. It begins with delight and moves from there toward God. Even in the academic life, I see this. There is all the difference in the world between the student good by rote and the student good by delight. There is a kind of fire in the student good by delight, which, if they don't lose it, has life conquering capacity. That's the same difference as in our relations to God. And to be delighted with the subject matter does not stop the student from making mistakes on the examination, but it brings them back to the subject matter following the exam in a continuing relation.

It is the same with God. May delight always return us to him.