

“True Religion”

Pentecost 13 Cycle B

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Texts: Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9; James 1:17–27; Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23 August 30, 2009



It seems that all things new and most things oddball start right here in California. Often as not, Southern California. And so about six years ago an entrepreneur named Jeffrey Lubell started a new company to produce authentic American denim jeans — as if there aren’t already a thousand brand out there, do you think? Authentic American jeans that redefine denim but bring them back to the glory days when they fit and looked as good as they did in the 1970s. I think the problem there is that, if you’re over 40, *nothing* fits the way it did in the 1970s, and buying a new pair of jeans with bell bottoms won’t bring back our youth!

At any rate, Lubell started this company, which now has stores in 21 cities nationwide, and named it True Religion brand jeans.

It is an apt symptom of our world today, I think. If anything, nobody seems to know what “true religion” is anymore, and every so often another entrepreneur starts up another one, claiming that *it* is the true religion.

And the phrase itself, coming from an older translation of today’s Second Reading, is the springboard for Lubell’s branding of his blue jeans. As we have it now from James 1:27, it reads, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: . . .”

Yes? What is it? What is religion that is pure and undefiled before God?

Sometimes people hear voices, and they think those voices are from God, telling them what to do. The voices I hear are from people from all kinds of experiences and backgrounds, who tell me what they’ve been through with religion. A nice young woman at the street fair a week ago told me quite a bit about her experiences with religion, how she was humiliated and shamed in front of her church, and how she wants none of it any more.

In fact, each of today’s readings give us a “take”, a snapshot, a “trailer” if you will for you movie buffs, on what true or pure religion is.

In the First Reading, Moses delivers a message that he says was from the one and only God, and it is a message filled with commandments. “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.”

This is religion which we might call kind of “cut and dried.” It seems to fit hand-in-glove with “answer book” thinking. If you can find something in the Bible, and the Bible is absolutely God’s truth, then you can take it and apply it to any situation in life. You can stick it on like a bandage, or aim it like a gun. You can box it up, or box people in with what the Bible says. Women, for example, were treated like property, with no personal civil rights for centuries in Western Europe and the United States, because you could prove they were supposed to be in the pages of the Bible. And this kind of religion leaves no wiggle room. “You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it,” said Moses. Or as it has been boiled down for the bumper sticker, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

But the real truth is that we must interpret the Word of God in order for it to be of any use to us.

Do you remember Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*? If you grew up in a Lutheran church, they made you memorize large blocks of it. Luther did the original “Q and A” on matters of faith,