A Jewish nonprofit group is joining forces with the website and radio podcast *On Being* to offer cash prizes to people who can come up with the most compelling answer to this question: “If you could start a new religion that would change the world for the better, what would it look like?” *The Challenge for a New Religion* encouragespeople to:

Imagine a religion or philosophy that cuts across boundaries, strengthens sense of community and acts as a force of good. Design a new philosophy to live our lives, a framework for a new belief system -- or a reimagining of an existing one.

Sounds promising, doesn't it? A framework to strengthen community and act as a force of good seems refreshing and new. As I read the online comments to the article about *The Challenge for a New Religion*, I observed a couple of things. First, a good number of people responding were highly critical of the religions that are already out there, so much so that they don't want to have anything to do with any of them. I could see how these people would be attracted to the idea of wiping the slate clean and building a new religion from scratch, divorcing themselves from all the horrendous wrongs that have been committed in the past in the name of religion. My second observation was that it is absolutely possible to construct a religion that seeks to bring out the best of humanity without God figuring into the equation at all. For many thousands of years, humans have attempted to create systems that depend on innate human goodness, compassion and reason and reject the idea of a deity that is in control of the universe. After all, God has the tendency to get in the way of human logic, has expectations that are too hard to fulfill, demands loyalty, includes outsiders we would rather keep on the other side of the lines we draw around ourselves, challenges the comfort of our traditions and our decidedly human rules.

At first, the people who gathered in the synagogue were excited to hear Jesus speak. After his baptism, Jesus had been led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where the devil encouraged him to make bread from a stone, impress crowds with death-defying leaps and claim political power for global domination, all invitations for Jesus to pursue greatness over faithfulness. Having overcome all those temptations in favor of staying faithful to the One who had sent him, Jesus returned to his hometown. All along the way, people started talking about Jesus. When he taught in synagogues, he was widely praised. Those reports had made it to Nazareth, so when Jesus went to the synagogue there, people were ready to hear a dynamic speaker. So, when Jesus stood up during worship and read from a scroll; everyone was listening. Jesus read a familiar segment of the book of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus looked right at the worshippers in the synagogue and told them, “As I speak, this scripture is being fulfilled.” The people were amazed by what Jesus had to say and by how eloquently he said it. They knew Jesus as the son of Joseph, a local carpenter, they had watched him grow up and they could hardly believe that the man standing in front of them was the fulfillment of a long-held, fervently hoped-for prophecy. Perhaps the crowd began to think about all the things Jesus could do for them, how he could make all their troubles disappear with the wave of his hand. God had surely blessed the people of Nazareth by raising up this magical prophet among them.

It took almost no time for the people's praise to turn into curses and threats. Things began to sour when Jesus reminded the worshippers of two occasions when God had acted in the past – first when God provided for the prophet Elijah through a widow in Zarephath. Not only did the widow live outside the confines of Israel, making her suspect to begin with, the widow had no way to feed Elijah; she was ready to die of starvation after one final, meager meal with her son. In a merciful miracle, God extended the widow's almost-empty jars of meal and oil and made it enough to feed herself, her son, and Jesus for days. Jesus also reminded the crowd in the synagogue about the great number of lepers in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha and how none of them were healed except Naaman, a Syrian – again an outsider and suspicious.

Jesus did not have to say any more. The people in the synagogue got his drift and they didn't like it one bit. How dare Jesus suggest that God's power and favor had to be shared with those outside the church's doors? There were plenty of poor and oppressed and ill among God's chosen people. Why couldn't Jesus keep his ministry small, his scope manageable and predictable? Why would he even think of bestowing his grace upon those who were not from a long line of faithful followers?

Suddenly, admiration turned to rage and the crowd chased Jesus out of the synagogue and beyond the town limits. They pushed him toward a cliff and fully intended to hurl Jesus over its edge, but he turned and walked through the crowd and went on his way.

Jesus left the people bitter and disappointed. What kind of prophet was this, who would challenge their beliefs, who would extend God's favor to gentiles, to their enemies, to those who did not deserve a second glance from God? This Jesus expected too much of them. They would be better off constructing their own religion – one that was sensible and reasonable, rewarding those who kept the rules and pushing back those who threatened them, pushing the One who frightened them the most onto a cross, where he would be dealt with quickly, for once and for all.

This Jesus expects too much from us, too. He is constantly pushing us to extend his grace beyond the walls of our churches, into our communities and further and further than we think we can go. How tempting it is to imagine a religion without him, without his persistent and annoying reminders about his inclusive, radical love. We sometimes even pull it off, squeezing Jesus into a small and manageable space, setting him aside when he tries to force us into places we don't want to go, covering our ears when he tells us what we don't want to hear, pushing aside those we don't want to consider a part of his kingdom.

That person in your family or in this church who bothers you the most, who pushes every button you have, who can irritate you just by breathing? The holy love we are called to share not only includes that person, but is patient and kind toward him or her. Those people who dress differently from us, who speak a language we cannot understand, who beg for a place where they and their families will be safe from persecution? God's love through us does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. Those who have messed their lives up royally – those in prison, in rehab, at the food bank – somehow we are to let them know that God's love for them bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. You and I – unable to see ourselves clearly in a mirror, but totally and completely seen by God, in all our glory and shame, are fully known and fully forgiven, loved and cherished. We are called to be part of a mad explosion of love, moving to eradicate hate, suspicion, prejudice based on religion, on race, on sexual identity, erasing all the boundaries we have created. For in our hearts we know this truth: every time we draw a line between ourselves and someone else, Jesus is always on the other side.

I'm sure there will be some impressive entries for *The Challenge for a New Religion.* Maybe one or more of them will catch on and some good will be done in its name. You and I? We're too busy with the religion we already have, this puzzling, wonderful movement of grace that grabs us and won't let us go, that always turns us toward Jesus, that anoints us with the Spirit so we may bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and set the oppressed free. The truth is, this probably isn't the religion we would choose if we had the chance, but it is the life our Lord has chosen for us. And so we follow as he leads us to a love that is bigger, more inclusive, more surprising and challenging than anything we could come up with on our own.

Amen.

*Epiphany 4C*

*January 31, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 4:21-30*