

Proper 17B  
September 1, 2024

15 Pentecost  
St. Paul's Port Townsend  
Creation 1

Song of Solomon 2.8-13  
Ps 45.1-2, 7-10  
James 1.17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I am VERY ready to get back into the gospel “routine” of Mark after our 5-week romp through the Bread of Life Discourse in John’s gospel. What more can be said of bread?? I like the rhythm through the church year of one particular gospel and we’re closing in on the end of our time with Mark. The days are getting shorter. Advent is coming....!

We don’t get the same continuity in the Old Testament readings although we are using what is called the “semi-continuous” track of the lectionary. It started in Genesis last year and we’ve now moved out of Samuel and 1 Kings. We don’t read the whole books by any means and we leave out lots of the good stuff, but we get a sense of the story of God’s people from Creation through Abraham and his family, Moses and the Exodus, the period of judges and then kings, culminating with David and Solomon.

Now we get to take a trip through some of the less frequently heard Old Testament books until Advent: Proverbs, Esther, Job, Ruth, and this lovely reading from the Song of Solomon. The scholars don’t believe Solomon wrote it, although he’s mentioned in it several times. It’s also called the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles, meaning the best of the best, like King of Kings. It is categorized as one of the wisdom books along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

These are the only verses we ever get from it, perhaps because they really are love poems, and some of them are pretty descriptive, even racy. ☺ This is often chosen for weddings because it extols the beauty and wonder of physical love. Some believe it is completely allegorical and describes the relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the Church. Certainly, a case can be made for that, but in verses we didn’t hear today, I would argue that “your kisses [are] like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over the lips and teeth” sounds pretty human to me.

After some weeks of Jesus teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, I’m up for kisses; eyes and ears and skin. It is an incarnate faith we have. It makes some people nervous and uncomfortable to think of these romantic words as Holy Scripture; perhaps that’s why it seems easier to believe it’s allegorical. But the only way we can learn about and experience Creation and the world around us is through our bodies and senses, our heart and mind.

Even with its fairly erotic language and poetry, the Song of Solomon didn’t have nearly as much trouble staying in the canon as the Letter of James did! It has a suspect reputation since it doesn’t

refer at all to the life, death or resurrection of Jesus. The entire letter only mentions his name twice. Martin Luther called it an “epistle of straw for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel in it.” He wanted it removed from the canon because of its emphasis on works, which Luther viewed as contrary to Paul’s teaching on grace.

We’re going to read from James for five weeks, so we’ll become a bit more acquainted with it. I remember a church friend from years ago who told with a groan of a new priest at her church who started a Bible study and began, not with a Gospel or Genesis or a prophet, but with James....

What we hear today hits pretty hard on being do-ers of the Word; not only hearers who forget, but do-ers who act. James gets very insistent about living the faith you have in you, not just showing up in church on Sunday and leaving without having invited the Word to enter your heart; without allowing the Bread of Life to transform you.

Jesus is making a case for not “doing it the way we’ve always done it” just because it’s in Torah. “But Jesus,” they say, “there are laws!” And the Pharisees were premier law-keepers. If you disregard the laws, do you throw the baby out with the bathwater? Is everything lost?

Jesus surely didn’t think so and spoke of coming to fulfill the law rather than abolish it. Laws and regulations have their place; we wouldn’t have much of a society without them and the Hebrews used them as a way to set themselves apart and form themselves into the people of God. But do they give life, Jesus asks, or can they be a stumbling block to the work of the Kingdom of God?

The Episcopal Church has had its share of law breakers over the years when it became evident that some of our practices were barriers to the fullness of God’s love and work. Today there is an openly gay woman who is the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington, with her seat in the National Cathedral presiding in front of dignitaries from all over the world and all manner of patriarchal hierarchies.

Not so many years ago that would not have been possible on many fronts: her gender and sexuality were deal-breakers when the church laws said she could not be ordained, let alone consecrated a bishop.

Not so many years ago the church rules were that you had to be confirmed before you could receive the sacrament of Holy Communion; that baptism wasn’t enough. In many places, there remain restrictions on who is allowed to receive communion, even in the Episcopal Church. Not so long ago, only one man and one woman could be married in the church.

These were rules or laws that were barriers to the freely given love and healing and invitation of Jesus. They no longer gave life, but withheld it. There are other changes in the church that some wish to make as we look at the attitude of our hearts, because present human traditions are overriding God’s commandment to love. And James’ imperative to “do.”

What does washing hands and cups and kettles have to do with honoring God when the content of the human heart and the intentions which come from it are the real issue of what defiles? Everything which harms another or defiles God comes from within us. We know that. But it’s

oftentimes easier to stick with laws on the books that to actively work to change them into something that is life-giving.

And we learn things over the years. Jesus learned some things about coming for all people, not just the Hebrews and listening to a pesky woman about crumbs under the table. His coming to “fulfill” the law is not unlike the growth that we have in society, human interactions, and may I be bold enough to say, “science,” over the years. We’ve learned some stuff about being human and our views have changed.

If you’re active on social media at all, you have likely seen a graphic that goes something like this: “If scientists change their minds about something, they didn’t lie to you. They learned something!”

We are still learning. 100 years from now our great grandchildren will be mortified by something we think is just fine right now. My mother had no idea that smoking was bad for babies when she smoked through all her pregnancies. It was a hard lesson, but we have learned. We don’t always listen, but that’s another topic.

When the Industrial Revolution kicked off in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, we had no idea that extracting coal from the ground to power new industrial equipment which made lives easier for some and treacherously difficult for others, that the air pollution you couldn’t see through in Europe was a long-lasting horrific “advance” in society. We didn’t know that we were not the center of the solar system. We didn’t know there was such a thing as bacteria. (Although we DID know that beer was somehow healthier than water!)

We didn’t know that excessive social media use would cause rampant depression and suicidal tendencies in our youth. We didn’t know that burning fossil fuels would increase ocean temperatures and kill off coral and melt the ice sheets, strengthen hurricanes and create a fifth season called “fire.” We have learned some stuff. James says, “Okay, now do something about it that gives life in the fulfillment of your faith.”

So there’s the hard part. I read a beautiful meditation this week by Richard Rohr, taken from his book *The Wisdom Practice: Order, Disorder, Reorder*. In it he tells a very personal story about his own spiritual and intellectual journey. It began in a law-abiding pre-Vatican 2 family which was stable and led to a happy childhood. Order. Then travel and a broad education in philosophy, theology and the humanities toward critical thinking. It was a heady time but not a peaceful one. Disorder. A loss of “innocence.” Then a recognition of larger viewpoints, his own progression, a more honest sense of justice and greater inclusivity. Reorder.

Jesus and James are here in the pews with us this morning. There are old ways which no longer give life. We have learned more about what it means to be human and beloved by God. We have learned more about ecological degradation and destruction and the part our hungry appetites for acquisition has played and continues to play. The “order” of doing what is easy and makes us happy and satisfied materially is past. We have learned some things and there is disorder all around us as our old destructive ways on living on the planet have been shown to be non-sustainable and are crumbled around us. But reorder is emerging. It’s been coming for decades and is gathering speed.

Solar and wind and tidal energy are advancing. We keep our distance from the orcas. We are clearing fish passages. We eat more local in the “slow food” movement. We can ride the bus for free. Reorder will be centuries in the making – if we have the will to let the old ways fall into disorder so that a new way of being human on this planet can emerge. We know what is right; our mission is to align what we say we believe about the preciousness of life on this planet with what we actually do.

James is going to be “getting up in our business” for four more weeks. Oh boy. Our task is to see that what we do lines up with what Jesus did: advocate for the poor, feed the hungry, care for the sick. Protect all life. Reject violence. It sounds big and sometimes impossibly difficult and our little efforts so minor in the big picture. But David Lose believes that most of the people in a congregation have little to no idea that what they do matters to God. James urges us to live fully into our identity as children of God, entrusted with the wholeness of Creation, reflecting our faith in how we order our lives. Everything we do counts.

Lest we think our little efforts don’t matter, here is a reflection, “Seeds of life and hope” by Steven Charleston from his book *Ladder to Life*:

I have a small vision to share, one that came to me through the night walks we call dreams. In my dream, I saw a shadowy figure standing high on a darkened hill, throwing seeds into the wind. Once the seeds left the figure’s hand, they turned to tiny points of light and were carried away into the sky. That’s all I remember, but it is enough. You and I stand on a windswept moment in history. All around is us is a gathering darkness. But we are not afraid because we have seeds of life and hope in our pockets. Our task is to cast them as far and wide as we can. The breath of the Spirit will do the rest.<sup>75</sup>

An intimate kiss for the life of the world. Thanks be to God.

Gail Wheatley+