

Proper 17B (Pent +14)

The Rev. Dr. Darcy Williams @ Emmanuel Chestertown

29 August, 2021

Readings: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A little down-time this summer, away from the office while recovering from surgery and while on vacation, allowed me the opportunity to go through some old files and documents. Some were paper files, and some electronic.

One of the electronic files I had saved was an email containing beautiful photographs: lovely flowers, magnificent birds, and breath-taking landscapes. But it was the text at the end that caught my attention. It was the story of a college professor and a surprise test he gave his students. One day he walked into the classroom and announced the surprise test. He told the students he would hand out the papers face down. When everyone had received his or her exam paper, the class was instructed to turn the papers over. To everyone's surprise, there were no questions, just a black dot in the center of the page. Seeing the puzzled expressions on his student's faces, the professor told them: "I want you to write about what you see." He would answer no questions, so the students began to write.

Near the end of the class, he collected their exams and began to read them aloud. All of them, without exception, described the black dot, defining it, and trying to explain its position on the sheet of paper. After reading all the answers, the professor looked at the class and said: "I am not going to give you a grade on this, I just wanted to give you something to think about. Did you notice no one wrote about the white part of the paper? Everyone focused on the black dot. The same thing happens in our lives. We have a white piece of paper to observe and enjoy, but we always focus on the dark spots. Our life is a gift given to us by God, with love and care, and we always have reasons to celebrate: nature renewing itself every day, our friends around us, the job that provides our livelihood, the miracles we see every day . . ." Then he asked the class to remember the blessings that they enjoy, and not just the problems they face, and to carry that thought into all parts of their lives.

How often do we focus on the dark spots and let them take center stage? Certainly there are plenty of things to worry about: the situation in Afghanistan, continuing efforts to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies, and concern about the thousands of refugees. Then there are the wildfires and drought in the west, Hurricane Ida slamming the Louisiana coast, the Delta variant, the affects of flooding and earthquakes in Haiti, not to mention all those whom we know and pray for who are dealing with hard diagnoses, various illnesses and painful conditions.

We are inundated with stories of sorrow, grief, turmoil, and violence every time we turn on the TV or read the newspapers. It is easy to allow the darkness to overpower the light. to make us feel helpless in the midst of the chaos, to focus on the dark spot and miss all the brightness that surrounds us. Our readings today give us another picture of the world and advice as to how to live our lives.

In the reading from the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, we hear a poetic love song, celebrating the joy of pure love and comparing it to the exquisite beauty of all of God's creation. The psalmist follows by singing praises for God's creative actions, love, and righteousness which have given hope to the people.

Then James reminds us that “*every generous act of giving, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*” Throughout these readings we are called to look to the beauty and joy of God's gifts to us. That does not mean to ignore the dark spots, but it does mean that we should not allow them to take over our lives. Only when we can see beyond the darkness to the glory of God in the world can we be the ambassadors of God's message of love and peace that we are called to be. Only when we can hold on to hope in troubling times do we have the opportunity to the light in the darkness, and a positive force in turning things around for the better.

Both Jesus in our Gospel lesson, and James in our Epistle reading, deal with avoiding the pitfalls of focusing on the wrong things.

Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees who question him about following Judaic law. Why, they want to know, do his followers eat with unwashed hands? Why does Jesus repeatedly violate the Hebrew traditions that dictate who one may associate with, and what are appropriate actions and behaviors for the Sabbath? Jesus responds: “*Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*” Jesus reminds them that it is not how or what a person eats that keeps them from God, it is how they treat others. It is only by focusing on the gifts of God and sharing those gifts with others that we truly follow Jesus and live the life God calls us to live. Jesus warns his followers not to get caught up in human-designed trappings that take away from our relationship with one another and with God. When we become so enmeshed in the rituals, we lose focus on the important business of doing God's work, of being God's hands and feet in this world.

James writes to the early Christians living outside of Galilee and Judea encouraging them to be faithful witnesses to the goodness of God's gifts, even in the face of persecution, reminding them to “*be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.*”

For James, doing God's work is the ultimate responsibility and response to God's loving gifts to us. It is not a means of earning God's love, for God's love is freely given and cannot be earned. But doing God's work is what we must do to truly be followers of Jesus, to live the life Jesus has called us to live, following his example of service and commitment to all of humanity. In the words of today's collect we pray: “*Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: . . . increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works.*” When we hold on to hope and live our lives empowered by God's grace, we will find ourselves nourished with all goodness, and bringing forth the fruit of good works. As we do so we will spread the light of Christ for all to see as we become doers and not just hearers of God's word in our lives. Amen.