

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

August 30, 2015

Proper 17B/Ordinary 22B/Pentecost 14

The readings this week:

- Song of Solomon 2:8-13 ◦ Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9
- James 1:17-27 ◦ Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

What Matters and What Doesn't....

It's an old story, this one, and one with roots not in malice, but rather, youth and ignorance. It is when I first began to discern what mattered and what didn't in ministry.

I was a young pastor serving a small, rural church. The people there were kind and they were kind to their pastor.

When I began my ministry there I quickly learned it was their practice to simply come forward for communion in a line, to stand before the pastor who gave them the bread and the council member who held the chalice of wine, to receive the sacrament, dipping the wafer into the wine and then move on, making room for the next one in line. This is fairly common practice today. In the late 1980's, in my experience, not so much.

It never occurred to me then to even ask why they did this. Looking back now I find my lack of curiosity striking, but that also may just have been a result of my youthful inexperience. And so it was that when our first Lent together rolled around I thought to suggest another way...that for the season leading up to Holy Week and Easter perhaps we could celebrate the sacrament instead by kneeling at the altar and receiving it by 'table.' Lent, after all, is a season of penitence, and kneeling would seem especially appropriate then. To be sure, this was fresh in my mind from a recent seminary class and being a 'newly minted' pastor I was eager to serve faithfully in the ways I had been taught.

And so on the first Sunday in Lent we knelt for communion. Again, remember these were kind people and they had a deep respect for the office of pastor and so almost without exception they would accept the pastor's suggestions even if they were dumb. I'll never forget that morning as the good people of St. Paul Lutheran Church did as their pastor asked. Winifred, the matriarch of the congregation, sat on the right hand side near the back. She was a round faced woman whose wrinkles had been etched from years of smiling. Indeed, she was not young and her knees were not what they used to be. After most of the rest of the congregation had come forward, Winifred made her way to the front as well and knelt with all the rest. I remember

wincing to watch as she struggled to get up again. And it hit me that this was why the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church did not kneel to receive the sacrament. They did not do so out of kindness. If Winifred could not kneel, then no one would. The next week we quietly returned to standing as the bread and wine were shared.

The questions, of course, are indirectly posed by this week's Gospel. "Why do we do what we do?" "Is it rooted in God's intent for us or is it simply our 'human traditions' which guide and inform us?" "What matters and what doesn't?"

Now to be sure a lot of our 'human traditions' may well be rooted in a great deal of good. Although they are far outside my own experience, and I would be hard pressed to explain them, I am certain this was also true of the practices observed by the Pharisees in today's Gospel lesson. Only Jesus would remind us, along with the prophets of old, that what we speak or the rituals we keep mean nothing at all if our lives are less than charitable. In the same way, while what we do on the outside can enhance our faith, such practices also may have no bearing at all. It is, finally, what comes out of us that is a truer reflection of who we are, not what goes into us.

It's not the same thing, of course. Kneeling to receive the sacrament is not the same as the hand-washing rituals practiced by the Pharisees. And yet, perhaps the point is the same in the end. For I expect Jesus was happier with the people of my first congregation for their kindness than he would have been had they continued to kneel simply because it had always been done that way. One, of course could argue that they went overboard, that just because one couldn't kneel doesn't mean the others shouldn't. Still, I have always thought of their collective ritual action as simply kind. And I've never forgotten the lesson learned that season about paying attention and going deeper and raising questions about what matters and what doesn't.

*Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt,
[Dancing with the Word](#)*



Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#)

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 is a revelation of the Shulammite's beloved being a mighty king who is able to overcome obstacles and conquer them (leaping over mountains, bounding over hills). He is swift like a gazelle and powerful and majestic like a stag. Read Revelation 19:11-16. What do you notice about Jesus in these verses as the king? It is in these verses that the maiden has her second crisis. The beloved calls her out of her place of safety and pleasantness and wants her to come with him to the mountains and hills. Verses 11-13 speak of it being the time for the harvest. See Matthew 9:37-38 and John 4:35. He is inviting her into ministry with him. Yet she is fearful and refuses in verse 17. Have you ever been fearful of where the Lord may take you? [The Church of St. John](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9](#)

Reflect for a moment on the character of your God. He is the powerful judge and the Creator who flung the stars into space. But he is also the one who knows and loves you and became your Savior. Let this knowledge fill you with peace as you look to the words of God. Psalm 45 is a wedding song celebrating the marriage of a king of David's dynasty to a foreign princess. In verse 1, the poet refers to himself. What does he say are his purposes for writing? What are the characteristics of this king? How could these verses refer to more than David's reign? Verses 6 and 7 are quoted in Hebrews 1 and are used to describe the reign of Jesus Christ. How could the description of the king in this passage be applied to Christ? We are Christ's bride. What promises do you see for yourself in this passage? What kind of a response does seeing the majesty of Christ cause in your own life? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

We make time to love life, O God, because your love of life is a constant presence that surrounds us. We touch the petal of a Cosmos blossom or notice the head of a sunflower as it follows the sun's course. We love our lifemates and our children with all our hearts. We enjoy the beautiful form of the human body and rejoice in the infinite variety of your creation. Thank you. Amen.

~ [Sermon Suite](#)

Balance

Balance. I guess that is what I am getting from these scriptures today. We can carry our traditions and rituals so far that they become detrimental to us. On the other hand, we could also use these words of Jesus to make ourselves feel better about eating an entire cake in one sitting or drinking ourselves into a black out. "Well, Jesus said that it isn't what goes into the body!" Mind. Body. Spirit. With all that comes with those three - intimate love, feasting with friends, studying the word, keeping the rules that are for our own good, and serving our neighbors because we want to put into action our faith. Mind. Body. Spirit. I can't help but wonder if reaching equality of effect among these would be heaven on earth.

~ An excerpt from [Miriam's Tambourine](#)

3rd Reading: [James 1:17-27](#)

There's so much to listen to all around us. What different voices and messages are on your mind? How can being quick to listen and slow to speak help us to be slow to become angry? James tells us that God's Word was planted in us. What weeds can choke that Word and keep it from growing? How is the person who merely listens to God's Word different from the one who puts it into practice? According to verses 26 and 27, how do people who think they are religious differ from those who are truly religious? Based on what you've read in this chapter, do you think James would be satisfied with good works apart from our listening to and receiving God's Word? When is it hard for you to listen to God? Sometimes we do listen to God's Word, but we still don't follow it. How is this true for you? How would you like your religion to be more "pure and faultless"? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

4th Reading: [Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

Consider your spiritual life. Are there any aspects of your devotional practices that you feel bound to? Consider before God whether you are putting unrealistic expectations on yourself. What are the Pharisees concerned about? How does Jesus' view of becoming "unclean" differ from that of the Pharisees? What religious traditions influence your life? Is that influence good or bad? Why? What sorts of traditions do we observe today that get in the way of really honoring God? In what ways do you sometimes emphasize appearance over internal reality? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)