

Bible Study
Proper 18, Year B
September 6, 2015

(RCL) Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:27-29)

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

All the readings for this Sunday seem to point toward mercy and justice, reminding us of the first petition of the Collect: "Grant us...to trust in you with all our hearts." So many times in our interactions with others, especially with strangers, we find it difficult to trust. We have learned that it can be foolhardy to give someone the "benefit of the doubt," to enter a relationship by suspending judgment and assuming the person's motivation is good unless we are proven wrong. The ancient wisdom of Proverbs reminds us that rich and poor, neighbor and stranger, even the just and unjust are all creatures of God. Perhaps our daily encounters do require us to be prudent, and we can blend prudence with a gracious recognition of our shared humanity. We can choose to act with justice and compassion, and to value integrity over prejudice or greedy self-interest.

- Besides physical and material support, how can we "share our bread with the poor"? Describe an occasion when you have observed someone giving generously of his or her time, attention, labor, or some other resource.
- What would you be willing to do or say to defend a stranger against injustice?

Psalm 125:

"The hills stand about Jerusalem; so does the LORD stand round about his people..." In the language of the Psalms, God's power in creation is often mirrored in God's mercy and protection for God's chosen people. However, our worldview is often at odds with such a straightforward equation. We have seen too much human domination and cruelty in history and in recent events that makes us dubious, and we can't help thinking it a bit naïve of the Israelites to proclaim, "The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway" over those who are just, good, and true of heart.

But read this psalm again, and notice how much is expected of the faithful: they are to trust in the Lord, not put their hands to evil, and remain true of heart. It is those who turn aside – who do not look to God for their guidance and strength – who follow crooked paths and end up among evildoers. Here we find an expression of wisdom, possibly even born of hard experience, rather than naïveté. No, we can't go through life expecting God to keep a protective bubble around us; that would be belief in magic, not faith in God. Perhaps the psalmist is saying that our trust in God should be for our spiritual protection against our own selfish tendencies, more than against any outward enemies.

- Who do you think is to blame, when calamity befalls a person or group of people? Is the answer always clear?
- In what ways might God be standing guard over us, if not to prevent us from suffering the pain and injustice inherent in human existence?

James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

Scholars have long debated the identity of both the author and the intended audience of this epistle, but its message remains strong and clear: one who claims to have faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord must live in a way consistent with that faith. When we genuinely trust God's power and love, we cannot turn our backs on the poor or show favor to the rich based on superficial distinctions.

Debating the relative importance of faith and good works is like asking the old question about the chicken and the egg – indeed, neither is viable without the other, and so we must look to the true source of life in both. Some people receive and respond to God's love in an outpouring of faith that then is expressed through their sharing of that love with others. Some people act in just and compassionate ways out of an intellectual commitment that gradually deepens into faith. What James warns his readers about is the 'disconnect' – we cannot say we have faith and then act unlovingly without violating our own integrity. It is in this sense that he challenges them, "Can faith save you?" The superficial faith that does not urge us to action for the sake of God's reign and love of God's children is truly dead and useless.

- Think of a time when you met a person whose socio-economic condition was greatly different from your own. How did you feel? How would it feel if your positions were reversed?
- What actions might you take to express your faith as you now understand it? In what ways might your faith grow if you take those actions?

Mark 7:24-37

What an odd, even awkward pair of stories we read in this Gospel lesson. There is no escaping the fact that they do not present Jesus in the best light, and they were preserved by the earliest Christian communities and included by the author of this first written account of the Good News. We must look a little deeper to find their significance to early Christians, and their importance for us.

Mark weaves the idea of a "Messianic secret" throughout his story of Jesus' ministry. God is already present and powerfully active in the world, as seen in Jesus' miraculous healings and exorcisms; but we must also accept that God's full restoration of creation – the perfection envisioned by ancient prophets – is yet to come at a time we cannot foresee. Through that lens, we might view the stories of the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man as prophetic symbols of God's power to transform and restore the world's division and isolation.

Mark tells a story in which Jesus has gone a long way from home, and by implication a long way from the Jewish population, the children of Israel for whom his ministry began. When a Gentile woman seeks him out and asks his help, he replies in a way that sounds rude to us but would in fact have made perfect sense in the context of the first-century Church. Jesus *had* come to the "children" first, but then had extended his compassionate ministry beyond his own ethnic boundaries. Told from within a community of Gentile Christians, this encounter with a desperate mother presents Jesus as validating and blessing their faith, even against the background of a strained history.

Jesus moves on, but in an even wider circle beyond his Galilean base. In this companion story, we find echoes of the same themes – Jesus takes the deaf man aside, away from the crowd; he performs the requested cure, without seeming effort or even difficulty. Finally, he tells everyone to keep quiet about it but they proclaim the news far and wide. Here is the Gospel: the power of God is present, among us, and cannot be contained even though it has not yet been fully revealed.

- Where are our blind spots, and what messages are we not willing or able to hear? Do we need to understand this passage as an invitation to move outside our own boundaries or our ‘comfort zone’?
- It is hard to keep quiet when we have good news to tell. What kind of joy or gratitude do you have in your heart that wants to be shared? Can you see God present and working in your life somewhere? Do you hear God calling you into something new? Try to articulate those experiences.

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Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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