



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 9
Proper 12 (B)
July 25, 2021

RCL: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Not only was David an inspired leader, but he was also the “Don Corleone” of his age. This king reveals his mafioso-like cunning – he carefully arranges the death of an unwitting rival while distancing himself from the terrible deed. It is most notable that the authors and editors of 2 Samuel preserved this unflattering story and included it in their compilation (the authors of Chronicles, an operatic presentation of the events recorded in Samuel, omit David’s wicked action). Popular piety through the ages has tried to soften David’s sins in this episode – blame has been shifted to Bathsheba (she seduced him), or the motive was actually David’s deep love for the woman. According to some ancient rabbis, the marriage of a Hittite – Uriah – to an Israelite woman was offensive to the Lord and David acted heroically to right this wrong! In reality, David was an adulterer and a murderer. We might see in him the amalgamation of light and shadow that characterizes each of us. We are all vulnerable, vulnerable to the temptations of power, wealth, and sex, and no matter how holy, righteous, and confident in our goodness we might be, shadow lurks just below the surface, waiting for an opportunity. David had every gift but the most essential – self-knowledge.

- How does this story of David’s transgressions invite you to ponder your own shadow side and capacity for evil?

Psalm 14

Psalm 14 bears witness to a perennial truth – we all sometimes live as if there is no God. This way characterizes what the psalmist calls the “fool.” We also notice, however, a tension in these verses between the evildoers and “my people” (vv 1-3 and 4-6.) We might interpret this as the tension we all carry as we grapple with the reality that we are light and shadow. Each of us has the capacity to turn not only away from but *against* God in our actions, words, and choices. Yet we all know what it is to flee to God for refuge when we realize there is nowhere else to turn. These internal contradictions we carry are not a failing but rather the human condition. Our psalm invites us to deeper self-knowledge and awareness of our shadow.

We could also interpret this poem as lamenting inordinate human pride and the illusion of control. J Clinton McCann, in his *New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary on the Psalms, reflects, “What is truly

shocking is that what Psalm 14 calls foolishness and what other psalms call wickedness, is essentially what our culture teaches people to be – autonomous, self-directed, self-sufficient... We don't need other people and we don't need God!" Who among us is unaffected to some extent by this mindset? No one, "no, not one..." (v3).

- How might Psalm 14 invite us to deeper self-knowledge and shadow work, individually and collectively?

Ephesians 3:14-21

The second-generation Christians who received these words faced extraordinary existential questions, for they witnessed their founding members – the apostles – and many of their brothers and sisters in the church face torture, exile, and martyrdom. What's more, by the time this text was composed, the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed – the one external symbol of God's presence and a visible connection to the faith of their ancestors. Now, the only people in their world who had holy gathering places were those who worshipped the emperor and gods of Rome; the Christians had no external supports. Therefore, the prayer that they be strengthened in their inner being through the power of the Spirit (v16) carried powerful resonance. The image of being rooted, as if in a nurturing garden of love, carries the symbolism of tapping inner strength in the fertile soil of Christ.

Finally, we note that the author begins this prayer with a sentiment that challenges us today as powerfully as it did our ancestors-in-faith 2000 years ago – God is the loving father of every "family" (the Greek *patria* can also be rendered "clan"). Theirs was an era similar to our own in its factions and polarization, yet the Ephesians are being called to reclaim and live in the reality that all belong to God.

- How are you being invited to nurture and become more deeply rooted in your "inner being with power through [the] Spirit"?

John 6:1-21

I've often heard preachers try to explain this Gospel by saying that Jesus convinced the people to share their food with each other. Their open-heartedness and mutuality were the true miracles. This is a fine lesson, but there is something deeper here – the power of the "Bread of Life" in the face of overwhelmingly hopeless circumstances. Let's briefly explore what this text might teach us about Christian hope, as well as the notion of testing (v6) and finally the move to make Jesus king (v15).

We note that John evokes the memory of the Exodus by setting this story in the wilderness near the time of the Passover festival. Those sacred events from Israel's past were also apparently hopeless situations overcome by the creative, surprising power of God. Ronald Rolheiser observes, "What do we need to understand about the loaves? We need to understand that we are with the bread of life, everything we need to feed the world we already have... We have the resources already; though on the surface those resources will always look over-matched, hopeless, dwarfed, nonsensical, wishful thinking. On the surface, invariably, we will look... not up to the task of ... feeding a hungry, greedy world." *Hope* is trust that God, with our cooperation, will find a way.

John records that Jesus questioned Philip to “test” him (Greek *peirazōn*). This word is also used in Matthew 4 (the “Temptation” narrative). Does God test us? Many well-meaning people attribute hardship in their lives to the testing of God (or the devil). I think they’re trying to say that God is present with them when it’s difficult. But the notion that God “tests” us is discomfiting. Adults don’t do that to each other – we call that “mind games.” When the Bible talks about testing, we might interpret that as saying that life sends us challenges and God watches how we respond. This is what Jesus was doing with Philip.

Finally, notice how Jesus runs from the move to make him king. This desire to “crown” Jesus is the reaction of people who are “amazed” (never a positive thing in the Gospels!). Jesus realizes this is a gut response from an overwrought people. It’s not from discernment, from maturity, from the soul. Jesus models for us how the spiritually conscious leader responds to and redirects the overwrought energies of excitable people.

- Where in your life are you being called to exercise the kind of “hope” discussed above?

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