

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 24, 2009

We look here at the lections for Sunday, August 30, 2009, which is the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 17. All three of the lessons are from different books than last week and weeks previous, from Solomonic history in Kings to the Song of Solomon; from Paul's letter to the Ephesians to James; from the Gospel of John to Mark. These are significant transitions which preachers may wish to acknowledge.

Song of Songs 2: 8 - 13

What beautiful verses these are, so full of love and promise. Scholars and interpreters debate whether these are allegorical of the love of God (or Christ) and God's people, or of simply the poetry of human love? Can't they be both? In our time, when sex nearly assaults us at every turn, the indirectness and mystery of love and sensuality here is refreshing. A couple weeks ago, here, I mentioned a new booklet to which I contributed, "A Book of (Un)Common Prayer." Here's one of mine from that collection titled, "In Thanksgiving for Sex."

"What an amazing thing you have created, O Lord, the human body and coupling in hunger and delight, deep enough to drown in. There's nothing quite like it, Lord, this sex thing. Here we take one another, shy and self-conscious, and at least at times know a fleshly grace. Oh, it tangles us in sin often enough. Or maybe it is we who tangle sex in our sin? But still it's part of your really good creation. Praise be to you, O God. Amen."

James 1: 17 - 27

In the canon of Scripture James provides a kind of counter-point to Paul. If the latter heralds the work of God and God's grace in Jesus Christ, James sounds a more Jewish emphasis on how those who have known grace are to live, that is on ethics. First off, James dismisses the idea that temptation or ethical failure on our part could be God's fault. Don't blame God! There are then a series of exhortations and admonitions about the kind of life believers are to live. The lives of the faithful are integrated, what they say and what they do, what they believe and how they act, being of a piece. The wise, according to James, know how to listen and to "bridle their tongues." Moreover, they concern themselves with the needs of the vulnerable, "orphans and widows in distress." While some, e.g. Luther, have been troubled by what they feel to be James "works righteousness," James reminds us that grace, while free, is not cheap; it requires something of us. And the something it requires is not just words or good intentions.

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

After five weeks in the very different thought and linguistic world of John, we now return to the gospel of the year, Mark, from which we shall hear until year's end and Advent. If Mark is in almost every way a different rhetorical and narrative world than John, still there is some thematic convergence here. You might say that this text challenges empty liturgy or ritual. John did that as well, in emphasizing that when it comes to the sacrament it isn't about

getting the words right, but a deep and living connection with Jesus. So here Jesus shifts the emphasis from outward appearances to inward disposition. Preachers need to be cautious about two things, giving the impression that this is Jewish, but not a Christian, problem. Not true. And we ought be cautious about turning the Pharisees into a cartoon version of hypocrisy. Better to consider the ways we are like unto the Pharisees, overly concerned with how we look to others. The deep spiritual issue here is perhaps the way we project our own stuff onto others, instead of looking into our own hearts, we find fault with and judge others. Jesus asks us to consider ourselves, our hearts and inward disposition, and deal with that. So often in congregations, we do project our own issues/ fears onto others. So often in the body politic we do the same, locating our own sin in easy targets, whether immigrants, gays, welfare "cheats," red-necks or what have you.