

## THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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

Soon after hearing the good news that the Vestry and Search Committee announced that The Rev. Copeland Johnston had been called to be the new rector of St. Thomas, I looked at my schedule, curious to see what scripture readings were assigned for today - my last Sunday here as this time of transition soon comes to an end. To my surprise, I discovered that the oldest literature of its kind in Jewish history is our first lesson - the love poetry of the Song of Solomon (which appears only one Sunday every three years in our lectionary cycle); while in Mark's gospel, Jesus is in the midst of tension and conflict (stirred by people upset with him because Jesus didn't meet their expectations of a rabbi); and, as if these readings aren't enough, we start in our second lesson today a five-Sunday message from one of the church's early pastors named James as he skillfully goes about his ministry of loving, serving and dealing with all the challenges that arose in congregations entrusted to his care. Where do I start? Or do I simply say 'thank you' for the gracious and generous hospitality you've shown me and Louise – and sit down!

I came across a handwritten note when I opened a resource book this past week – a note I scribbled to myself at a continuing education class on preaching years ago and felt as if I had scribbled that question for a Sunday such as today!

***What does the Holy Spirit want the people of God to hear from these texts on this occasion?***

It's not my style, but I'm going to briefly try to paint a 'scriptural collage', starting with the poetic imagination of the Song of Songs – a reading which gives us pause to consider a narrative we don't hear nearly enough within our religious institutions and faith-based communities – and it is that the gift of our human sexuality is, in and of itself, a precious gift – a gift God created – a gift WE ARE as embodied spirits through which we love and are loved, by which we serve and are served. God knows, as we know, how complicated this gift of human sexuality can be...and (not 'but'), **and** – at the same time - at the end of the day as at the end of our lives, life is a mystery to be shared, a mystery the depths of which lead us, if we are open and receptive, to the power of genuine love.

Turning now to Jesus in Mark's gospel, Jesus starts getting his wrist slapped by some of the religious leaders of the community as to why his disciples were not washing their hands before they eat. There's obviously more at work here than meets the eye. If we look

at our worship bulletin, we notice that we went from verse 8 to verse 14 – and then skip from verse 15 to 21. Please know that this is not a typo.

The assigned reading for today skips a part that has to do with the heart of the matter in this heated confrontation in which Jesus uses some pretty harsh language, telling his critics as he looks them in the eye while he quotes Isaiah - that Isaiah “prophesied rightly about you hypocrites”, noting that they “abandon the commandment of God and hold on to human tradition.”

The best example of WHY Jesus spoke as he did, is found in verses 9 through 13, which ended on the chopping block of the lectionary committee. Here’s what happened in this frosty encounter as Jesus went on to say to those who had issue with his preaching and practice, “You have made a fine art of setting aside God’s commandment in the interests of keeping your traditions! For example, Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’... Yet you declare, ‘If a person says to his father or mother, any support you might have had from me is *korban*’ (which is a buzz word meaning dedicated to God), “you allow that person to do nothing more for their father or mother. You use the name of God, and act as if you have God-given power to nullify God’s word to justify your own self-interest, which you promote as tradition.”

These folks were giving themselves a religious tax break, so to speak, at the expense of their own parents, the elders of the community who depended upon their children for food and other essential resources they were unable to provide for themselves in the vulnerability of their old age. Jesus calls the Pharisees and experts in the law *hypocrites* because he had no patience with those who manipulated or exploited people in the name of religion, especially the poor. It didn’t take much for Jesus to become passionate when it came to the great commandment: love God and love your neighbor - an all-inclusive message requiring of his listeners an ability to imagine what life would be like if we lived as God intended us to live.

So, to finish this scriptural collage, I’d like to end with the beginning of the Letter of James, who is very clear in his letter to the Christian community in Jerusalem that we are all sisters and brothers in Christ, that our differences need not create factions or cliques. He acknowledges that no one can force us to be friends or to love one another and that, in fact, tensions and barriers and different perspectives and opinions are all part of who we are as a community of faith. Anyone who’s ever been involved in any organization knows that it takes many different personalities with many different gifts and a willingness to become involved as committed members for the organization to be healthy and to grow in its mission. It’s no different for us as a church. We need one another. And we need to model in our world by the way we relate to one another that each of us carries the holy within us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We need one another, for it’s not just through our own efforts and commitment to the mission of the church, but through

our individual and community openness to God's gifts and indwelling Spirit, that we're able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

The same Spirit that has been invisible though palpably present, actively at work in the diligent process of searching for a rector for the past 20 months, is with you to lead and guide you as you welcome Father Johnston and his spouse, Andrew, into this parish family of St. Thomas and our Diocese of East Carolina. I wish you the best of God's blessings and encourage all of us through the pastoral metaphor James offers us in our second lesson today, that we don't just look at ourselves in the mirror and then forget whose we are and to whom we belong as baptized members of the church 'marked as Christ's own forever.'

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever (Ephesians 3:20, 21).*

Amen.