



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 15, Proper 17 – Year B September 2, 2018

[RCL]: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

What an invitation! There are few more evocative, alluring images of joyful satiation than this excerpt from the Song of Solomon. In fact, this brief book is filled with such sweet, colorful and tantalizing images, it's worth a fifteen-minute read. Interestingly, you'll find that there is nothing sentimental or superficially romantic about this poem. Alongside does prancing in gardens and moonlit rendezvous, you'll find scenes of confusion, loss and violence: these lovers encounter each other in a city prowling with armed guards and cultural, if not racial, prejudice. Enjoy this song of songs for its unbridled joy, and grant also that it speaks to a vision of the fulfillment of time wherein love enters into its most profound consummation.

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

Does kingly language work for you? Why or why not? If you do happen to find the monarchical overtones grating, try this: imagine this psalm was written by a poet in the king's court. Let's also assume the psalmist was male. What was his purpose in writing this verse? Was it praise to God, the king, or both? While we may never know exactly who wrote the psalms, it can be helpful to imagine different authorial perspectives. It can also be spiritually fruitful to imagine Jesus reciting the psalms in Hebrew in his first-century Palestine synagogue. What did this psalm mean for him?

James 1:17-27

That's quite a powerful concluding statement on the nature of "pure" religion! Intriguingly, the author's two exhortations appear to stand together tensely, almost in contrast. Caring for orphans and widows, at least today, can be a very messy activity – certainly not one I'd take on if I intended to remain unstained by the world. Did the author mean for this tension to exist, or is this something read into the text by its contemporary audience? For the two projects to complement each other, perhaps the author is imagining an "unstained" church in which orphans and widows behave in orderly fashion (!). Or perhaps he refers to vague aspects of "the world" not necessarily involved in the complicated care of the disenfranchised. The idea that the "church" and the "world" are distinct has gone in and out of fashion over the past two

millennia; how does this distinction work for you? If the church is the people of God, then where is the church Monday through Saturday? What is it doing? And where?

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

It's hard to discern the emotions behind the words, but if the Pharisees and scribes tossed their question to Jesus innocently, then Our Savior's response was not entirely gracious. It feels like a bit of an overreaction, really. Of course, the question may have snapped with snark, instead. Either way, it appears that the questioning of whether Jesus' teaching resided within or outside of the "tradition of the elders" struck a nerve. Jesus didn't see himself as the founder of a new religion, but rather an interpreter of his own religion, Judaism, as understood through a mysterious and profound relationship with God.

How much ought we to trust tradition in our religion? When does tradition constrain or enable our personal and collective spiritual growth?

This Bible study, written by Laurel Mathewson, originally ran September 2, 2012.