



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 6, Proper 8 – Year B
July 1, 2018

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Characters in the biblical narrative of the Old Testament tend to be complex, a mixed bag of vice and virtue, and they are good as moral exemplars only in a selective way. In this portrait, two of David's greatest – though perhaps least understood – virtues shine forth unmixed for our own imitation: reverence and friendship. David's reverence for God causes him to have a supernatural respect for, and even love of, his king—the Lord's Anointed—despite Saul's repeated and unjust hostility, even despite Saul's illegitimate possession of the crown at that point in time. Likewise, the more *we* come to love God, the more we come to love those people and things that are associated with him and to voluntarily avoid those actions that could displease him. And so it is with the virtue of friendship, which produces the true miracle of community, the miracle of selflessly desiring the good of another, sharing one's life and highest values with them. The ancients saw friendship as truly essential to a person's happiness, such that the philosopher Aristotle once said, "Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."

David possessed such a bond of friendship with Jonathan, that he considered Jonathan a brother, and his loss provokes a profound sense of grief. It is for such a context as this, I suspect, that Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4), for their love was genuine.

- Does our culture practice reverence toward those in positions of great responsibility, such as government officials or priests and other ministers, or even the elderly? Have cultural norms or scientific advances made reverence obsolete, or does our reverence have some connection to our relationship to God?
- Has our present culture allowed a space for true friendship between two men or two women that is a non-sexual relationship? How might we go about regaining friendship in the church?

Psalm 130

This is a psalm that should be in the emergency toolkit of every Christian. Here we are taught that, even in the depths of anguish, shame, and guilt, we can wait with earnest expectation upon the Lord's forgiveness. The psalmist neither presumes upon that forgiveness, as though sin did not matter to God, nor does he shrink back before God, even at that moment when I imagine his soul is most tempted to flee in fear and self-condemnation. In great humility, he cries out to be restored to communion with God. He knows from experience that his relief and redemption come only from the Lord, even though it is the Lord whom he has offended.

As the psalm comes to a close, the psalmist encourages God's people to follow his example, keeping confidence in a God "whose property it is always to have mercy," as we say in the Prayer of Humble Access. And Israel's hope is not disappointed, for God sends into the world his son, whose name shall be called "Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

- How have your past experiences of God’s character and his promises in his Word affected the way you handled some difficult circumstance or emotion in your life?

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

I remember there was a time when I would cringe a little every time I heard one of these passages about financial giving in church. So often, we see in the news another megachurch pastor or televangelist who has been lining his pockets with a six-figure paycheck, pleading with congregants to hand over their hard-earned money for “God’s Kingdom”.

But the circumstances for St. Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians to undertake a collection is radically different from such so-called “super-apostles,” who exalt themselves and make a personal fortune from the Gospel. St. Paul calls us to remember the example of Christ’s own self-emptying in our giving: “For your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (v. 9). The collection is an opportunity to test the *genuineness* of their love, how much the generous love that is in Christ Jesus is abiding in them. This generosity of Christ, when it is living in you, moves as naturally and instinctively to take care of the poor as you would move to take care of the wounds on your own body. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, “All life is inter-related. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, it affects all indirectly. As long as there is extreme poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich, even if he has a billion dollars.” Only in generously enriching the lives of those in need are we ourselves made truly rich.

- Have you ever felt enriched by sharing generously with others?
- John Wesley famously wrote, “The last part of a man to be converted is his wallet.” What can our spending habits tell us and others about our relationship with God?
- How does St. Paul understand economic justice in this passage? Is it merely equality of wages, or is it somehow more complex?

Mark 5:21-43

According to ancient Jewish purity laws, any Jew who had come into contact with one who has misplaced bodily substances, or with a cadaver, was ritually defiled and thereby unworthy to approach the Divine Presence – the essence of wholeness and life – until he or she could be ritually purified. Ritual impurity was transferred like an infection from the impure to the pure. Shockingly, in this passage, we see two stories where Jesus comes into direct contact with perceived impurity, and rather than infecting him, the purity and power which are within Jesus transferred wholeness and life to the two subjects! St. Mark is showing us in this narrative that Jesus himself is the Holy of Holies, the Temple of God upon whom the Spirit dwells, walking among us and “counter-infecting” the world with holiness, purity, righteousness, and life.

In reality, like the crowds in this story, *we* often brush shoulders with Jesus without any awareness of the fact. But when we touch him with faith and eager expectation, the power and life that are in his glorified body are made available for the healing and transformation of our humanity and world. We as Christians become conduits for Jesus’ power and grace to a world alienated from God’s presence.

- What sorts of things do you suppose might hinder a free flow of the life-giving Holy Spirit into our lives and circumstances?
- Why do you suppose Jesus put the scoffers outside the room before he raised Jairus’ daughter?

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