



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 12
Proper 15 (B)
August 15, 2021

RCL: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

God writes straight with crooked lines, and Solomon certainly was a crooked line! Our reading today presents the idealized Solomon – humble, righteous, and God-fearing. After all, he is concerned foremost about serving God and being a wise ruler. But the context of our reading reveals that Solomon was a complicated man, with a but qualified love for God. The three verses preceding our lection remind us that Solomon brought a foreign wife to Jerusalem and worshipped at “high places” in violation of the Law, and first built a house for himself before building one for God. Subsequent history witnesses Solomon’s oppressive rule resulting in a split between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

Rather than holding Solomon as a role model, we might interpret this narrative as an invitation to reflect upon God’s call to the imperfect, to the undeserving, and the flawed – in other words, to each of us. This is the mystery and miracle of God’s grace – we can’t do anything to become worthy of it but open our hearts and say yes to this gracious gift.

- How have you experienced God’s grace through your flaws and imperfections?

Psalm 111

Our psalm takes the form of a beautifully creative acrostic poem – each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Within this literary architecture are timeless words of wisdom that nurture and nourish us on our journey toward holiness. The poet’s themes include the following, all evocative of the exodus and Sinai experience – God initiates relationship with us through gracious action, we are called to respond in gratitude; we praise God both in formal liturgy and also in our way of living; “fear of the Lord” is authentic knowledge, the key to a fruitful life.

Notice that “fear of the Lord” is placed in the middle of the text (for ancient authors the most important place) and the final verse. Our attention is drawn to this phrase, the foundation of all wisdom teaching. To fear the Lord is to acknowledge that there is a God, and I am not it, and I am ready to submit myself to God’s instruction. Psalm 111 invites us to recall what God has done for our ancestors and wants to graciously do for us, yet God patiently awaits our “yes”.

- How are you being called to a deeper sense of “fear of the Lord”?

Ephesians 5:15-20

We have a great turn of phrase in our reading - “Making the most of the time because the days are evil.” Literally in Greek, “redeeming the time.” “Evil days” probably was a reference to the expected apocalypse, but we can reinterpret the phrase as a comment on our historical moment. How are we being called to “redeem the time” during these days of evil?

Each of us and our communities must answer this question for ourselves; our verses from Ephesians can serve as inspiration. Let’s briefly look at a few key themes that touch on some core Christian theological concepts. First, “Paul” underscores that Christian faith is *communal*. One cannot alone be a disciple of Jesus. Christian anthropology doesn’t allow for a solitary faith. Bishop Desmond Tutu put it this way: “It is not ‘I think therefore I am.’ It is rather, ‘I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.’”

Second, Christians live with boundaries. We submit ourselves to a discipline characterized by self-control. The author implies a two-fold point in his warning about drinking wine – this harms the body of the individual but also the corporate body. In other words, one’s actions have consequences not only for the individual.

Third, note that our passage begins with a mention of wisdom and ends with a mention of the Spirit. Being “filled with the Spirit” can be interpreted as learning the ways of Wisdom. In the Hebrew Bible, the terms “wisdom,” “word,” and “Spirit” were interchangeable. This inspiration bears fruit in harmonious living with others in our communities, which our author symbolizes with images of singing, playing, and addressing one another in psalms.

- What challenges from our culture face the Christian notions of community, boundaries, and living in the Spirit of Wisdom?

John 6:51-58

On one level, this week’s Gospel is about the Eucharist. On another, our verses could be interpreted as a commentary on being part of the Christian community. I’d like to focus on this latter approach. Let’s consider the Greek word John chose to use for “flesh” – *sarx*.

In the New Testament, *sarx* is usually (but not always) used in a negative way. “Flesh” is often a metaphor for selfishness or actions done apart from the wisdom and guidance of God. *Sarx* also refers to the soft, ephemeral, mortal, corruptible aspect of the human being. Interestingly, John could have used another word – *soma* – usually translated as “body.” In the New Testament, this term is used to describe the resurrected, glorified body of Jesus, and the redeemed body of the Christian. *Soma* carries a positive connotation. So why did John choose *sarx* over *soma*?

Scripture uses the phrase “body of Christ” in three distinct ways – Jesus’ physical body, the Eucharist, and the body of believers. *Soma* is an appropriate word for the first two, but I suggest that *sarx* is fitting for the

third. To follow Jesus is to be a part of a community, and we know that this is no easy task. Communities are messy, difficult, corruptible, dysfunctional, and sometimes (like our fleshy bodies) they stink! But if we're going to have the "life" Jesus is talking about, we need to be nourished with his flesh, the community. We have to learn to eat this flesh and drink this blood. This is indeed a hard teaching, and it is the reason that many turn away (I know many times I have been tempted to "spit out" this food and drink!).

Finally, we might also hear in Jesus' teaching to "eat [his] flesh" a call to be a nourishing, nurturing community, not junk food. Jesus needs us to cooperate with his grace so that we, his body, can be *life* for those who feed on him.

- How can we as a community be true food and drink for each other and the world?

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