



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Pentecost 14**

**Proper 17 (B)**

**August 29, 2021**

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

### **Song of Solomon 2:8-13**

Everyone loves a good love story. And it is tempting to choose not to see that these verses in the Song of Solomon are indeed a love story. While it is appropriate to view these words as a metaphor for our relationship with God, it is also a very holy act to allow the story to stand on its own and appreciate the tenderness that is woven throughout this love story.

This is the only time in the three-year lectionary that a reading from Song of Solomon is included. Maybe we can just ignore it for three more years, or perhaps, just perhaps - like the two lovers in our reading - we can wrap ourselves in the joy that can come from intimate relationships. God-given intimacy. Beautiful words, poetic words – and words that maybe make some of us blush.... just a little.

- Take a moment to view this story as a metaphor. What does intimacy with God look like for you?
- Read verses 11-13 again. Perhaps nature is God's intimate and creative gift to us. What are some ways that nature reveals intimacy to you? Write your own 2-to-4-line poem, using imagery of nature that is meaningful to you.

### **Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9**

Another love story. The presence of Psalm 45 in this lectionary series perhaps is a response to the Song of Solomon passage. This psalm is written from the viewpoint of a wedding guest, as the writer describes the loving relationship between a fair king, who rules from the basis of equality, and his bride. Jewish and Christian scholars alike interpret the words of this psalm as pointing us toward the Messiah.

Practically speaking, the fragrances – myrrh, aloe, and cassia – are spicy, sweet smells that today are known protections against infections and promoters of calming emotions. Romance, protection, equality, and a king who upholds fair treatment. Words of beauty, love pure and holy, words of hope. Yes, this psalm is a love story of hope to the reader.

- In today's pandemic atmosphere, what are the words that bring you hope?

## James 1:17-27

The Bible tells many stories about widows and orphans. You have Elijah and the widow – where Elijah appears to take the widow’s last amount of oil and flour, only to have blessed her to have an over-abundance. Jesus encounters a widow and restores life to her only son. During Biblical days and beyond, a woman without a man was doomed to a life of poverty and destitution. So, this passage makes it clear to us that true religion, true and authentic worship, has nothing to do with your yearly pledge or your prestigious position, but with how you treat the widow and the orphan or the least of those among you.

This passage in James also reminds us that words matter. It’s not only *what* we say that matters, but also *how* we speak our words. When we speak with rage, we are hurtful and we dehumanize ourselves and the other person. When we are living out the word of truth, we are aware when our words become weapons. We are aware when the widow and orphan among us need our truth and support. And we become active parts of the generous giving from above.

- Take a moment to remember a time when your words expressed an unhealthy rage. At what point were you able to stop and recognize the impact of your words?
- In what ways can speaking the truth and caring for the least of those among you be simultaneous?

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

We have learned over the past year in this age of Covid-19, that we can be very much physically defiled by not washing our hands. In the early days of the pandemic, we learned that we should even keep from touching our faces. So, what is Jesus talking about? Is Jesus trying to encourage eating with dirty hands? Of course not. But Jesus is making a point to the scribes and Pharisees: It is not what is outside, but what is in your own heart that defiles you.

Jesus warns that when we place human traditions over God’s directions, our hearts become wicked. He gives a substantial list in verses 21-23, teaching that these terrible things do not come from not washing our hands, but they come from within our own hearts – for it is the unclean heart that defiles us.

And these are some rather tough words to swallow: wickedness, defile, murder, slander – and the list goes on. We could very easily skim right over the words with the thought, “Well, I don’t do any of these things!” But try instead to keep it simple and ask yourself, “Am I honoring God with my lips, while my heart is far from God?” This is not an invitation to beat yourself up, but an opportunity to bring your heart in line with your traditions.

- Think of an example in your own congregation where something continues to be done because of tradition. Does this activity reflect the true mission of the church? Why or why not?

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