

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 17, Year B

First Reading

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

The voice of my beloved!
Behold, he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Behold, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
for behold, the winter is past;
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree ripens its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away. (ESV)

Second Reading

James 1:17–27

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (Omitted verses in italics. Verse 16 in brackets, late interpolation)

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your

mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." *[If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.] And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."* (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

The last two Sundays have included stories about Solomon, his rise to power, the dedication of his Temple. We are to hear no more about Solomon himself in our lectionary. Instead, this week and for the next two, we will read texts attributed to Solomon (though none as we have them seem to have come from his pen). This week's reading comes from the Song of Songs, or as it was later called, the Song of Solomon. This is the only passage from the entire book that we find in the lectionary, though it does occur twice. (Strangely, it also can be found in Year A.)

Before I talk a little about this excerpt specifically, I'd like to fill you in on what I've learned about the Song of Songs in general, and its history of interpretation.

For centuries the Song of Songs has been interpreted allegorically, generally as a song of love between God and the believer's soul. But in the latter decades of the 20th century and since, it has been the fashion to "free" this text from its allegorical shackles and allow it to be read as a rather explicit and very human love song between a woman and a man. That this song speaks of the enjoyment of non-reproductive sex is and was somewhat scandalous, given its inclusion in the canon of Scripture (both Hebrew Scripture and the Bible). This seems to me to be a large part of the rush to view it

allegorically. And yet in spite of the scandal, the likelihood that this Song existed first as a description of human love seems inescapable.

As a result, recent commentators have looked very unkindly on any allegorical interpretations of the book. Recent studies have demonstrated clear correspondence between the Song and texts by and for women, songs and poetry used among women. Some commentators view the woman's role in the Song of Songs (she is by far the dominant character) as a reversal of gender roles for women in the ancient Near East. Others seem to see a reinforcement of them. All of these insights are welcome additions to scholarship on the Song, but to suggest, as several have in recent decades, that they are the *only* valid way to read this text, to the exclusion of the allegorical would be, I think, a mistake.

I came upon a recent article that helped me understand all of this. Before I began my study this week I had only known the Song of Songs allegorically. I did not know that this interpretation had fallen out of favor among scholars. But David Carr, in his article for the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, gave me an outline of that history and then helped me see the mistake in insisting that the text be read either historically or allegorically to the exclusion of the other.

He shows in his article how clearly the Hebrew mind viewed its relationship to God as wife to husband. Perhaps most obviously in the images of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer, but also elsewhere, as in Isaiah's song of the vineyard. (Wives in the ancient Near East were often described as a man's field or vineyard.) As a result, it seems very likely to him that the Song of Songs should *also* be read allegorically. I find his argument both convincing and comforting.

I had a parishioner in one of the churches I served who found this romantic understanding of God's relationship to us, well, revolting. I could never bring it up without seeing her shudder and go a bit green around the gills. I don't know what was most upsetting to her, but I can't help but wonder if it hadn't something to do with God's almost helpless love for the the woman in the Song, "being driven mad with but one of her glances, by a single strand of her necklace." That God should desire us to passionately, so rashly can be difficult to swallow, but I think that this comes from the way that Greek thought permeated Christian understandings, the idea of the "unmoved mover."

At any rate, the more extreme allegorical images of God aren't given to us in the lectionary, only this small section where the Beloved sings of the Prince and His beauty, and the Prince woos her with beautiful poetry, calling her away. I can definitely say that my own spirituality has benefited a great deal from meditating on a God who loves me in

this way, who calls to me in this way. I'm grateful to David Carr for saving this way of reading the Song of Songs for me.

Here's a [LINK](#) to his article, should you care to read it.

Second Reading

For the next several weeks, our Epistle texts (in track one) will come from James, so a short introduction seems in order. And short it will be, because there doesn't seem to be much to be said.

Traditionally, the letter is attributed to James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. Scholarship on the letter seems pretty ambivalent about it. It may have been James. It may have been someone writing in James' name. It may even have been written by someone else whose name was James. (*Jacob* was a common name in that region at the time.)

For a good while, commentators on the letter thought it a collection of unrelated aphorisms. It was called by some the Christian version of Proverbs. Recent studies have discerned a common rhetorical strategy that does seem to bind the epistle, create some unity. One of the threads that seems to string the pearls in the letter together is "wisdom."

Lastly, it's worth recalling Martin Luther's famous quote concerning James. He always doubted that it should have been included in the canon and called it an "epistle of straw" because it lacked any of the spirit of the Gospel about it. The reference to "straw" would be an apparent echo of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3, "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done." (vv. 12-13) Paul's foundation was "Jesus Christ." James barely makes two oblique references to Jesus, and that only in passing. Much of the letter seems intended to dispute Paul's teaching on justification by faith alone (Romans 3:20, 28)

I have to acknowledge that the inclusion of this letter in the canon of the Scriptures puzzles me. While even Paul argues for certain behaviors not unlike what James demands, for him, such behavior is never a contributor to one's justification before God. James truly is contrary in its fundamental approach to the Gospel. So why is it here? I believe that every bit of the Bible is here for our edification, so I am left trying to make sense of this. And the sense that I have is only this: Sometimes God led humans, even in the New Testament, to include texts whose purpose it is to show us what we can do to

our image of God when we let our need for control get the better of our trust in the Gospel. Just that.

Given all that, there are tidbits from the letter that are worthy of use from time to time. While I may argue that some of the works that it requires of us do not contribute to anyone's justification, the letter's criticisms of some behaviors by believers still rings true. And this week our reading begins with a phrase that many of us have heard, but probably didn't know was from James, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."

James actually has a fairly specific idea about what "gift" he means here. This is a referent back to 1:5-8, where he speaks of God as the giver of wisdom. That is to say, throughout the letter, James speaks of wisdom, but not as something to be gained. It is only received as a gift.

The letter goes on to require that we be "doers" of the word and not "hearers" only. This is followed by some apparently unrelated descriptions of what it means to be a "doer." Bridle the tongue, visit the widows and orphans, keep oneself unstained by the world. I think here, that James is giving us a brief peek at three subjects he'll come back to in greater detail later in the letter. Such is the nature of the introduction to most ancient epistles. We will see each of these subject developed in the readings over the next few weeks (along with others).

So. What is your stance with regard to the Letter of James?

Gospel Text

Our text from Mark for this week is part of a significant suspension of the chiasmic structure of the Gospel as a whole. (See the diagram of the chiasm again, below.) This long divergence from the chiasm includes this controversy with the Pharisees, the Syrophenician woman, the healing of a deaf man, the feeding of the *four* thousand, the leaven of the Pharisees, and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida.

- A Beginning - John points to Jesus 1:4-8
- B Jesus' baptism - The splitting of the heavens,
"You are my son," 1:9-11
- C Jesus is tested in the wilderness 1:12-13
- D The parable of the sower 4:1-9
- E Raising of the young girl 5:21-43
- F The death of John the Baptist 6:14-29
- G Stilling of the second storm (exorcism of the deep) 6:45-52
- H Peter's confession 8:27-30
- I - Jesus' first passion prediction 8:31-33
- H' Transfiguration 9:2-10
- G' Exorcism of possessed boy 9:14-29
- F' Appearance of the rich (young) man 10:17-22
- E' Raising of the young man in Secret Mark
(followed Mark 10:34)
- D' Parable of the vineyard 12:1-11
- C' Jesus is tested in the temple 12:13-27
- B' Jesus dies, the temple veil is split "Truly this was God's son."
15:33-39
- A' The "post-runner" the young man, points to Jesus 16:1-8

All of this comes before the triptych of Peter's Confession, Jesus' Prediction of His Passion, and God's Declaration of Jesus' Identity on the Mountain.

Keeping in mind Mark's purpose, to tell the story of Jesus in a way that is meant to be heard all in one sitting, this move away from the chiasm serves a major purpose. It builds and builds the tension between Jesus and those who will seek His life, and it begins with this controversy about "holding on to the traditions of men." (7:7) You may recall from earlier divergences the important role that the verb *krateo* fills in the Mark's Gospel. (The verb used for holding on to the traditions) Jesus "*krateos*" people to heal them, to lift them up. Those who *krateo* the traditions of men also try to lay hold of (*krateo*) Jesus to kill Him. Here's a link that whole post, "What You Grasp Matters."

Mark brings this conflict between Jesus and his opponents into sharp relief by highlighting the verb in the context of this controversy about purity. It is worth noting that Mark's aside to his Gentile readers about the Pharisees and "all" the Jews washing their hands would have been inaccurate. Some Pharisees likely did, and some who followed, them, but not all. This was a tradition, not a dictate of Torah. So also, Mark's assertion that in doing this, Jesus "declared all foods clean" is overstepping. Jesus differentiated between what was important (what comes out of us) and what is not as

important (what goes in). By the time of Mark, though, these distinctions had taken on greater weight as Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus struggled to live together.

So for Mark, this story is less important for its teaching about purity than it is for the way that it builds toward Jesus' first prediction of His death on the Cross. He has heightened certain details to draw a clearer distinction between those who "hold" to tradition and those who "hold" to Jesus and His teaching. This was written well after the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, so the tensions within the larger church find an echo in the retelling of the story of controversy surrounding the washing of hands.