

Proper 17/Year B
Song of Solomon 2:8-13
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Fullness of Faith

Last year we changed the lectionary we use, the lectionary being the schedule of readings used in services in order to be more in line with most other Christian denominations which use a lectionary. As a result, many of us are preaching from lessons we haven't used to preach before, at least on Sundays, especially from the Hebrew Scriptures. And that is exactly what happened to me a couple of weeks ago when I looked at the lessons for today, and saw the first one was from the *Song of Solomon*.

Now of course it is commonly used at weddings, which makes perfect sense. It is a love poem, celebrating intimacy and passion. But that was the only place I had previously seen it used in services.

When freed from the context of other people's weddings, I immediately had this fantasy of my husband Skip leaping upon the mountains and bounding up hills in his usual uniform of shorts, t-shirt and flip flops, yodeling love songs to me. And I in this sort of Pippy Longstockings get up, yodeling back—truly a love story for the ages.

I'm not sure why we were yodeling since that wasn't real big in ancient Israel but it did make me giggle.

But maybe that is part of the book's underlying messages: among loves many attributes, joy should be one of them.

The inclusion of the *Song of Solomon* into the canon of Scripture is rather curious. Apart from the obvious point it is a poem describing in sometimes rather graphic language, the love between a man and a woman, God is never mentioned in it, not even once.

And yet the book has had its staunch defenders over the centuries. Some scholars have said the love and passion depicted in it serve as allegories of the love God has for us; or the love Christ, the bridegroom, has with the church, his bride.

Others don't necessarily try to put something in it which isn't there on the face of the narrative but support its inclusion in the Bible anyway. The venerable *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*¹ says the *Song of Solomon* appears to be "composed not to teach but to touch, to please, and to delight. The power of its beauty is its celebration of and appeal to love."

And if that is all it did, it would be enough. But I take issue with the comment the *Song of Solomon* is “composed not to teach” because there are those for whom faith does not please and delight, and in fact, can be punitive and far from life giving. And there are times when we all have to be reminded, to be taught, about the fullness of a life of faith. The *Song’s* graphic description of the soulfulness and physicality of love helps us recall this.

But to think we can reside always in the thrall of love expressed by the lovers in the *Song of Solomon* is obviously unrealistic. That kind of passion cannot be sustained indefinitely, nor is it meant to. But to claim the upper hand of righteousness by adhering to a certain code of conduct, at the expense of love, joy and mercy, can not only be soul killing, it can be unfaithful.

Immediately prior to today’s reading from Mark, Jesus has fed the 5000, walked on water, calmed the winds, and healed the sick and lame. And afterwards, what do the Pharisees focus on? They focus on whether or not his disciples observed ritual purity laws, saying they didn’t wash their hands before they ate.

Now most of us have been raised with admonition to always wash our hands before eating, and there are many appropriate reasons to do so, not the least of which is good hygiene.

But think about what the disciples have just been through. They have been following Jesus, some for a long time, across the countryside, probably with little rest or food. They are literally eating on the run. Plus, they’ve just seen him feed 5000 people, walk on water, calm the winds, and heal the sick and lame.

They could be excused for being if not a bit distracted, then certainly tired. And this elevation of form over substance by the Pharisees and the scribes is more than Jesus can abide and he strikes back at them admonishing, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Harsh words for these men of God, men who have spent their lives trying to uphold the ancient faith of Israel in an occupied land, often at great sacrifice. Harsh, but necessary words nonetheless.

Had they been able to look beyond what they saw as proper or correct behavior, and instead focus on what was happening right in front of them, they would have seen the glory of God in ways they never imagined, ways which would have refreshed and renewed their weary and tired souls.

Instead they worried about whether or not Jesus' disciples washed their hands.

Now it may be because what Jesus did was so outside their expectations and imaginations, they turned to their rules because they didn't know what to make of him. In all fairness, he was completely unlike anyone they had ever seen before. But perhaps that should have alerted them to listen rather than judge. In trying to catch Jesus and his disciples in a breach of religious law, they completely missed what they had been looking for all their lives.

It is a lesson we would all do well to take into our hearts. The Episcopal Church, at least on the surface of things, is an orderly one. We are a liturgical church and with some quirks, share a basic common liturgy.

We meet together every three years at a General Convention to debate and decide not only upon revisions to our liturgy, but our overall theological positions and common governing policies as well. And we do so using Roberts Rules of Order as revised from time to time by the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church.

People attracted to this church tend to be, at least in part, attracted to this orderliness. Its ways can be beautiful, comforting and feel almost other worldly.

At their very best our liturgy, our efforts to find the *via media* in our theological understandings, as well the way we govern our lives together, give us just enough structure so we can be both immersed in the mysteries of God as well as given pathways to find the presence of God in our midst through (in the words of our Dean) prayer, worship, learning, service, and generosity.

But as wonderful as these things are, they are not and never can be the full expression of God or a life of faith. And we should not treat them as if they were because if we do, we will be in danger of becoming like the Pharisees and scribes described in today's Gospel, and miss what is right in front of us: holding to human tradition at the expense of the commandments of God—to love God with all our hearts, bodies, minds, and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are here today because Jesus' very life and message showed not only those in his own time, but ours as well how we cannot let our focus on life as we know it blind us to other contexts and possibilities to find God. Because when we do, our lives become not more orderly but smaller and the joy God so wants for us to have, harder and harder to find.

Jesus came not so we could do things as we always have, but rather so we could have abundant life. He came so we may know the love freely given by the One who created us, and yearns for us to abide in its embrace forever. God says to us all:

*Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now 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 puts forth its figs,
And the vines are in blossom;
They give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.*

The Rev. Canon Allisyn Thomas
30 August 2009

ⁱ Bruce Metzger, Michael Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 710.