

**15 Pentecost
September 2, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning we heard from the Song of Solomon as the reading from Hebrew Scripture. This is the only time in our three-year lectionary cycle that the Song of Solomon is read, and the Song of Solomon is one of the few books in the Bible where God is never mentioned in the entire book.

Secondly, we begin a five-week stint of reading from the Letter of James. The Letter of James is not a letter at all. Although it is included in our New Testament canon it is actually Jewish wisdom literature. And other than the opening lines which were probably added long after the book was written, Jesus is only mentioned once.

Finally, we are returning to Mark for our Gospel reading after five weeks of reading from John's Gospel.

Now, I'm not sure what all this means. And it is puzzling to me why those powers-that-be chose these particular lessons for today. But I do find it wonderfully coincidental that we have a reading from the Song of Solomon just a day after Caren and I celebrate our twenty-eighth wedding anniversary.

*The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "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."
(Song of Solomon 2:8-13)*

Well, it has been a long time since I "leapt upon a mountain" or "bounded over hills" or saw myself as a "young stag." And, my fig tree has, once again dropped all its leaves before the fruit is ripe. However, Caren and I still talk about springtime after metaphorical winters, and we spend passionate time discussing what the rest of our life is going to look like ... "Arise my love, my fair one, and come away."

So what business does the Song of Solomon have in being in our Bible? Passionate? Yes, even bordering on erotic! And in the whole book God is not mentioned even one time. The Song of Solomon is a love song in which the woman's voice predominates, as it does in today's first lesson. She sings of her beloved, her beloved sings back to her in erotic, passionate, and

delightful lyrical poetry. However, the ancient Israelites interpreted the Song of Solomon as more than a Hebrew love poem. It was interpreted as a song of Israel to Israel's God. In the Song of Solomon, the language gets heated, erotic, and passionate in a way that might shock some sensibilities. Here is spirituality gone carnal, made flesh, embodied, heated, driven, obsessed, and exuberant.

Often we describe God as omnipotent, omniscient, distant, and transcendent. Many of our descriptions of God ... that which makes God most God ... are distance and detachment. We're down here, God's up there. We're down here, muddling along as best we can. And, God is up there, looking down on us, but not really very actively involved in our lives.

However, if you thought that our God is omnipotent, omniscient, distant, aloof, legal, and objective, the Song of Solomon reminds us that our God is a passionate lover who will stoop to almost anything to get close to us. Even becoming incarnate in another just like us ... Jesus ... or perhaps even in you and me.

In today's reading from Mark's gospel Jesus' disciples are censured by the Pharisees for not adhering to the rules. Jesus responds by criticizing those who follow the letter of the law, but fail to grasp its intent; who participate in empty rituals for the sake of the ritual ... as if it were an end in itself ... without the passion in their hearts to know a deep faith in their souls.

If you think that your faith is something that you do like go to church; something that you summon forth; a matter of your hard work and earnest desire, think again. If you think that faith is made up of merely attending worship, saying prayers, and participating in ritual, then I think you may be off the mark. I believe faith is when you know a relationship with God that is deep and passionate ... perhaps describable only in poetry.

I imagine that most of you have heard a version of this story. A young wife always cut off both ends of a ham before she cooked it. It bothered her new husband whenever she did it. One day he could take it no longer. "Please tell me, honey," he said, "why do you always cut a piece off both ends of a ham before you cook it?" "I don't know," she answered, "that's just the way my mother always did it."

One day the young husband bravely asked his new mother-in-law why she cut off both ends of a ham before she cooked it. "I really don't know," she answered, "but that's the way my mother always did it."

Finally, at the next family gathering, he asked his wife's grandmother why she always cut off both ends of a ham before she cooked it. "Oh," she said, "it's because I only had one pan to bake with, and it was too small for the whole ham."

According to Eric Hobsbawn and Terrence Ranger, authors of ***The Invention of Tradition***, this is how many traditions begin. And, they become an end in themselves even after their original purpose has been lost.

In this week's reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus confronts a group of Pharisees who accuse his disciples of disregarding "the tradition of the elders." Specifically, the Pharisees ask why some of Jesus's followers eat their meals with "defiled hands" — that is, why they eat without performing the ritual hand washing expected of observant Jewish people before meals. To our ears today, the accusation might sound ridiculous and trivial. But in fact, the Pharisees were asking a legitimate question, a question that still has relevance for us today.

Consider the context: the first century Jews among whom Jesus ministered were an oppressed minority living in an occupied land. How were they supposed to keep their faith pure and vibrant against the backdrop of colonization? In the midst of profound religious and cultural diversity, how were they to maintain their identity? Their integrity? Their heritage?

The Pharisees' solution to the problem was to contain and codify the sacred. How could God's people show forth their faith among pagans? Their answer was to practice the ancient rituals of their elders down to the last letter. They would wash their hands before every meal; refuse table fellowship with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other morally compromised sinners; and set themselves apart in everyday life as God's righteous and holy people.

Now, I can't speak to the intentions of the Pharisees, but Jesus did. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, saying, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

Ouch. But aren't the Pharisees just trying to keep the sacred sacred? Aren't they making a noble attempt to serve God in a public, visible way?

It's important to note that Jesus doesn't condemn ritual hand washing in his response to the Pharisees. He doesn't argue that all religious traditions are evil. What he indicts is the legalism, self-righteousness, and exclusivism that keeps the Pharisees from freely loving God and loving their neighbors in ways that are relevant to their time and place. What he challenges is their unwillingness to evolve, to mature, and to change for the sake of God's kingdom. What he grieves is the Pharisees' compulsive need to decide who is "in" and who is "out," based on their own narrow definitions of purity and piety.

It may not be a kosher comparison, but is this not like cutting off the end of the ham because that is the way it has always been done?

Again, it's easy for us today to look down on the moral rigidity of the Pharisees, but honestly, are we really so different? Don't we sometimes behave as if we're finished products, with nothing new to discover about the Holy Spirit's movements in the world? Don't we cling to spiritual traditions and practices that long ago ceased to be life-giving, simply because we can't bear to change "the way we've always done things?" Don't we set up religious litmus tests for each other, and decide who's in and who's out based on conditions that have nothing to do with Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality? Don't we fixate on the forms of piety we can

put on display for others to applaud, instead of cultivating the secret and hidden life of God deep within our souls?

Remember the old light bulb joke? How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Ten. One to actually change the bulb, and nine to say how much they liked the old one. Believe it or not, that is a true story. In my church in Toledo, Ohio we had a light bulb that dated to the time of clear bulbs with visible wires burning inside. When we finally had to change it, Muriel Saxton ... God bless her soul ... wanted to make a display box for it. Muriel was certainly one who enjoyed her tradition.

It doesn't matter what specific forms our legalism takes. In some churches it is deifying one worship style over another. In others, it means policing the political affiliations and allegiances of parishioners. In some faith communities ... as we well know at St. Cyprian's ... the lines in the sand have to do with women clergy, or gay marriage, or racial justice, or economic equality. The guises vary, but in the end, legalism in any guise deadens us towards God and towards our neighbors. It freezes us in time, making us irrelevant to the generations that come after us. It makes us stingy and small-minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace. It causes us, in Jesus's chilling words, to "honor God with our lips" but to "worship him in vain."

So what can we do? We now have a bigger pan to cook with. How can we honor God with our whole selves? How can we discern whether a tradition is life-giving or not? Jesus gives his listeners this advice: notice what comes out of you. Notice what fruit your adherence to tradition bears. Does your version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it cause your heart to open wide with compassion? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make you brave? Does it ready your mind and body for a God who is always doing something fresh and new? Does it facilitate another step forward in your spiritual journey?

Like everything else Jesus offers us, his confrontation with the Pharisees is an invitation. It's an invitation to consider what is really sacred and sacrosanct in our spiritual lives. It's an invitation to go deeper — past lip service, past tradition, past piety. It's an invitation to practice what this week's epistle calls "pure religion." A religion of love for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the outcast. A religion of faith in a surprising, innovating, and ever-creating God. It's not a "safe" religion. Or an easy one. But it's a religion of the whole heart, and it's far more precious than gold.

Our text from the Song of Solomon is an ancient Hebrew poem. It sounds like two young, adolescent lovers, and for all we know it may be. But you know how people of faith always read this? As a love song sung by Israel to her God. Faith is not a cool, calm, or rational matter of belief. It is a thing of love, of being loved by God, and loving in return.

What are we doing here when we come together week by week? What are we doing when we make our offering to God ... those selfless acts of compassion that feel sacred? What are we doing when we feed the hungry at Dining with Dignity, and open our cupboards to grab a box of

cereal for the Ecumenical Food Pantry? When we work for justice for the oppressed? When we confront systemic prejudice in our society? We will never change the world by just going to church. We can only change the world by being the church. We are loving a God who loves us and is loved in return. It's our song of love to the beloved.

A passionate love song. Sometimes there are no rational words for the love that we know for each other ... and for our God who loves us as well ... only poetry will suffice.

Amen.