

About and With
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 9, 2018
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Text: James 2, Mark 7, Proverbs 22

I'd like to start by talking with these 2 sections – the pulpit sections – my sections! – pulpit side! – strong side! - my side!

And what I want to talk with you about is THOSE people – the lectern sections – the lectern side.

Pulpit side people, I want to talk with you to make a list of how the lectern side people can become better, which is to say, more like the pulpit side. Let's talk together about them, and then we'll tell the lectern side what we've decided.

How do you like that, pulpit side?! – yes!

How do you like that lectern side?! – not so much?!



The lectionary texts we've heard today, they've had me thinking quite a bit this week about “ABOUT”, and about “WITH” – talking ABOUT someone, or talking WITH someone. The texts have had me thinking about that this week, but I realize it touches on things that have been percolating in me, that have been unsettled in me really, for a while – and perhaps as I describe what I mean it will make some connections for you too.

When I did that opening exercise with pulpit side and lectern side, I realize it's pretty corny, but I do think it makes you realize very quickly and

clearly that it is not enjoyable to have people talking about you – especially when you have no say in the matter at all – just a bunch of pulpit side people telling you lectern people about yourselves?! – that’s ridiculous and offensive. But at the same time, it can be quite enjoyable to be in the group that is talking about other people – makes me feel kind of smart to talk about other people – not necessarily because I am smart or know what I’m talking about, but somehow just to be a part of talking about others makes me feel better about myself. I think it’s sad but true.

So let me tell you what I’m talking about with all of this talking ABOUT – because what first got me thinking about it was the passage we heard from James. Now I am going to end up making a criticism of James – and in fact I’ll tell you right now that I am going to criticize James for talking ABOUT poor people. But what I want you to know is that this is not criticism that questions the motives or heart of the writer, James – in fact this is a kind of ‘talking about’ that is not gossip or critical but is talking about with the best of intentions. James says to be nice to poor people at feasts; he says that poor people are nice (they have a lot of faith) ; he to help those poor people if you have any faith at all – and if you don’t, your faith is dead. That’s very good from James.

But it just kept not sitting right with me, that James is talking about poor people- it’s the first time it’s occurred to me with this passage, so I’m just trying to work this out on the fly. Something seems off about just talking ABOUT poor people – probably seems off to people who are poor too; it’s probably what I do a lot; it may be in fact what I’m doing right now.

Part of what got me thinking about ABOUT was the story from the Gospel of Mark. Such a peculiar story if you’re familiar with it, and even more if you’re not. Jesus rude to a desperate woman, but she ends up

showing Jesus up. And of course a major part of what is going on here is the divide between Jews and everyone else – The Jews who are the chosen people of God, and everyone else...and this woman is part of the everyone else. Jesus had talked a lot ABOUT such people up until that time – Jesus was a Jew, and Jews talked about Gentiles as outsiders – Jesus knew all about the geography and ethnicity and gender and religion of this person, all of which left her out. But then Jesus talked with her – talked to her – listened to her – and something changed. I know it's just a little conversation, but it seems like a big deal – Jesus talked with her, and something changed in Jesus – she became a person rather than an object or hypothetical topic or even a project: something changes when things go from ABOUT to WITH.

The Proverbs passage takes us back to the poor: and in doing so it speaks about shared value found in being a creation of God; it speaks of generosity to the poor but also of the evil of injustice; and of having a good name. I'm not sure what to make of ABOUT or WITH in it all. But then it speaks of the LORD speaking on behalf of the poor – and it reminds me of a part of the Belhar Confession, a statement of faith from South Africa that we often use on our liturgy, which says: that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged... It speaks of God being WITH those dealing with injustice – so I wonder how to be with those around me in circumstances that I can hear God's voice in a different way.

ABOUT and WITH for Hope Church - I wonder if we start back with rich and poor, with have and have not – that there is a word of wisdom for us that we can get stuck in talking ABOUT other people: assuming that I have things and those others out there do not. Would Hope Church feel like

a place of hospitality if I was talked ABOUT in that way? – I don't think so. So I wonder if there is a way to speak about the ways that we all struggle with different things in life, and then to look together to the kind of wisdom offered to us in this scripture: about a generosity which all can participate in; about justice which we all need to speak with one another about; about a good name which is the integrity we are each called to. It is wisdom that feels like a step toward WITH rather than about.

And in that way it feels like a deeper step of spirituality, a way of being faithful, that God can open up and nourish in us. Because I start to realize that I talk ABOUT a lot of people, I'm afraid: I talk ABOUT people of other religions and those not religious; I talk ABOUT people of other races and ethnicities than mine; I talk ABOUT people with different political views; probably talk ABOUT other churches and Christians too. And in each case, I have to confess that talking ABOUT is a way of making people into "others" rather than people – and whether I admit it or not it is in some way making myself a bit better, above, superior.

There is a spiritual practice in this season that I call us all to participate in together: to lean in to WITH rather than about. It is simple; it is difficult; it is important; it is an act of faith. To lean into WITH rather than ABOUT is an act of faith that claims a common maker for all and which claims a common call of generosity, justice and integrity. I have been trying to lean into with, speaking with others – I've succeeded and it has been fruitful; I have failed and it has been frustrating – but it makes a difference to know the difference between ABOUT and WITH. And we can follow the example of our Lord that it changes something when we do so: something in us; something in how we see those around us; something about the wisdom of a shared calling.

This is not a table of ABOUT; it is the table of WITH; our Lord WITH us who invites us to be nourished in the Spirit of Life. Come to the table for that nourishment, that we may lean into WITH in our faith and living - that we can be WITH each other and our neighbors and our world in generosity and justice. AMEN.