

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 30, 2018
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Texts: Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22;
Psalm 124;
James 5.13-20;
Mark 9.38-50

You may have noticed there is no sermon title in the bulletin for today. There is no profound meaning in its absence. I was just running like crazy on Thursday morning and completely forgot and didn't want to hold up the printing of the bulletin. The fact that I still don't have one is my little act of rebellion. Everyone in the office knows I hate writing sermon titles. I'm not good at finding the creative, pithy summary statement which is why I never used them in all my years of ministry before coming here. The fact that I have written titles every time I have preached here in the last ten years speaks to how much I love you all!

I say there is no profound meaning in its absence but there actually is some meaning. I had a hard time settling on the center of these texts for today. I wonder how it was for you as you heard them this morning, or if read them this week before you came. I hope more of you are doing that now that we send the texts to you in the middle of the week through the *Praying Toward Sunday* emails. I had trouble settling because each and every text had this maddening combination of a profound piece of wisdom right next to and in some cases intertwined with some thorny piece of theology that would be a sermon of its own to unravel.

Just for example: take James. There is this beautiful invitation at the start of this text to live the totality of our lives **together** before God. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."¹

¹ James 5.13-14, NRSV

There is so much that is good in this invitation. There is an irony of living in this hyper-connected digital age. If you were on Facebook you know which park I was hiking in with my family yesterday and we all know every living move that was the horror show of this week in Washington, DC. We are more connected than ever before and yet we feel on the whole more isolated, anxious, and lonely than we have ever been before. James is lifting up for us an approach to life with each other and with God that speaks to that aching loneliness and isolation that is as needful today as it was when he first penned these words. The ending of this passage reminds us that our relationships in the church need to be of the kind Pastor Gordon mentioned last week. Not just giving us what we want – a visit or prayer when we are sick or showing up for the celebration when life is good – but giving us what we need: speaking the truth when we get off track. Calling us back when we wander away.

In the middle of this good and beautiful stuff are some verses that people have turned into a train wreck of Christian theology gone bad. You know the verse I mean “The prayer of faith will save the sick...”² You all know what I am talking about. Someone prays fervently for something that doesn’t happen and someone quotes this verse to imply that their illness or divorce or unemployment would be magically turned around if they would just have enough faith. That’s the piece in James that needs its own whole sermon to unravel.

Then there’s Esther; this incredible story tucked in the middle of the Hebrew Scriptures about a young Jewish woman living in a foreign land forced into the harem of a powerful king. She becomes the heroine of the story when she risks her life going before the King to advocate for her people. It’s a timely story. Women as sexual pawns. Men becoming enraged when their power is questioned. A heart-wrenching decision Esther has to make: does she step up and challenge the decision of the king and advocate for her people? She does so at great risk to her own safety. She goes after her Uncle Mordecai utters the most memorable verse in the

² James 5.15a, NRSV

book of Esther. Chapter 4 verse 14 “Perhaps you have come to (this place) for just such a time as this.”

But in the middle of this story sits this ugly, human thirst for revenge and violence. Yes, the Jewish people are saved. But only after Haman is hanged is the anger of the King abated. The Psalm chosen in response to this text suggests that it was because God was on their side that they prevailed over their enemies. Which on the surface sounds right and good until you think about the way **that** theology has played out over the centuries.

Which brings us to the gospel. The beginning starts strong with a real-world application of the teaching from last week when the disciples were fighting about who would be the greatest among them. As Pastor Gordon preached so helpfully last week, Jesus does this work to upend the equations they were running in their minds. Equations like “if Jesus is becoming popular and powerful and the disciples are close to Jesus then the disciples must be popular and powerful”. He deconstructs that whole world view of power and hierarchy and jostling for position and lifts up another way; where true life is found in the web of relationships through connection and community. He takes a little child into their midst and says “if you want to welcome God then you need to welcome one such as this.”³ Not two seconds later, the disciples are out there trying to stop someone from helping “one such as this” because he was not “following us”, they complained. Note the plural here. They are not concerned about whether the person is following Jesus. They were ticked because they were not the broker between this person and Jesus’ power. Jesus isn’t worried about credentials or affiliation or paying dues. He trusts that anyone who engages with him in this kingdom work will be changed by the engagement. The very act of welcoming and embracing the vulnerable - bringing healing and release and care and love - what he calls deeds of power; that very act will change a person. Such that they will not be able after it to speak evil of him. He then offers this beautiful, open-hearted invitation to collaborate with all comers: “whoever is not against us, is for us.”⁴

³ Paraphrase of Mark 9.37

⁴ Mark 9.40, NRSV

That's when the thorny pieces begin to intertwine. With talk of fire and hell and all manner of hyperbole. Clearly not meant to be taken literally but most certainly meant to be taken seriously.⁵ This is the passion of one who knows how much suffering and resistance they are going to meet along the way and wants them and us to **get** what he is teaching. Not just here (intellectually) but here (in the heart) and here (in the gut). So that his vision of life and his values for kingdom begin to interrupt our visceral reactions and deconstruct our mental models and moves us to feel and think and act in new ways.

Every single one of these texts has some piece that could take us down the rabbit hole. What do we do with unanswered prayer? What do we do with our impulse for revenge? What do we do with these ancient images of fire and hell? I have materials for sermons on each and every one of these rabbit holes because I went down them all! Eventually I set them aside and left my study to come in here to spend some time in evening prayer. One line from my prayer book jumped off the page: "As it was in the beginning, O God, so in the end may your gift of life be born."⁶

So I went back to listen for where these texts begin and end. Because the questions that I just named - the thorny, convoluted parts - they may sit quite literally in the center of these texts - in the middle - but they are not the heart of any one of them. They are not the "gift of life" for which these texts were told.

A story from Esther about the courage it takes to step into corridors of power and name with bold clarity your demand for the liberation of those who suffer. A story we are to mark with feasting and celebration. Not in a spirit of rivalry or exploitation but in a spirit of generosity; "a day for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor." That recognizes with the Psalmist that the whole of our life is lived by the grace of God: any help that we need and any accomplishment we pull off comes as we depend on the Lord who made heaven and earth. Especially, as we turn to one another

⁵ This phrase "not to be taken literally but certainly to be taken seriously" is built on an idea from R. Alan Culpepper, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Mark* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2007), 324.

⁶ J. Phillip Newell, *Celtic Benediction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 80.

in honesty, as the book of James exhorts, in the good times and in the bad. Knowing that this community and these relationships – our life together – is the context in which God’s help and grace is found. Because as Jesus makes clear to his disciples in Mark today, the gift of life at the end of this work – this sometimes-painful work -- of integrating his teaching here (in our minds) and here (in our hearts) and here (in our gut) is to be at peace with one another.

So in a week that has been full of all manner of knotty, convoluted parts – let us sit before these texts and receive their gifts and pray together:

“As it was in the beginning, O God, so in the end may your gift of life be born.”

Amen.