

Sunday, September 1, 2024 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Jesus protests against human customs being given the weight of divine law, while the essence of God's law is ignored. True uncleanness comes not from external things, but from the intentions of the human heart. Last week Jesus told us "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Now James says God has given us birth by the word of truth. We who were washed in the word when we were born in the font return to it every Sunday to ask God to create in us clean hearts.

Prayer of the Day

O God our strength, without you we are weak and wayward creatures. Protect us from all dangers that attack us from the outside, and cleanse us from all evil that arises from within ourselves, that we may be preserved through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

First Reading: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

⁸The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹My 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.

¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me:

"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

¹¹for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

¹²The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.

¹³The 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.”

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9

¹My heart is stirring with a noble song; let me recite what I have fashioned for the king;
my tongue shall be the pen of a skillful writer.

²**You are the noblest among the people;
grace flows from your lips, because God has blessed you forever.**

⁶Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever,
a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom.

⁷**You love righteousness and hate iniquity;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your
companions.**

⁸All your garments are fragrant with myrrh, aloes, and cassia,
and the music of strings from ivory palaces makes you glad.

⁹**Kings’ daughters stand among the ladies of the court;
on your right hand is the queen, adorned with the gold of Ophir.**

Second Reading: James 1:17-27

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray with confidence for the church, God's good creation, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

God of every generation, give the church a sense of purpose and belonging. Sustain and build up leaders and lay people as we accompany one another in our life with Christ. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

God of creation, you named humans as co-creators with you. Where the earth cries out in pain, bring wholeness. Guide governments and industry, that environmental laws and practices seek to heal and not harm. Bring relief and justice to people and places suffering from climate catastrophe. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Sovereign God, we pray for local communities of every kind: rural and urban; established and new. Lead those in authority to seek the good of all through their words and actions and to mentor others in honest and generous ways. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Healing God, you draw near to all who are hurting. Be with all who desire relief from chronic and acute illness, cancer, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Strengthen health care workers, therapists, and caregivers. Tend to those who are close to our hearts. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

On this Labor Day weekend we remember and give thanks for all who have fought for workers' rights around the world. Continue to improve working conditions and establish fair wages so that all people may thrive. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Comforting God, console us as we mourn our departed. We hold fast to the promise that death has been defeated by our Savior Jesus Christ. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

We entrust these and all our prayers to you, holy God, in the name of your beloved child, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

A reflection for this fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Heart of the Matter

When clay becomes a pot, it must first have a center. As a potter spins, pushes, and pulls the clay into its final form, it can easily lose its center and become misshapen. Having lost its center, it fails to fully be what it is being created to be—a pot, a pitcher, a plate, a thing of beauty, a vessel for others.

Faith and religious practice have lost their center in today's readings. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus calls into question "This people" that "honors me with their lips" but whose "hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). Some in the religious community have begun focusing on surface matters (the washing of hands, what one eats, the traditions of the elders) and have forgotten the core. What really matters is how one's faith is expressed in mercy, in words and actions that build up rather than tear down the neighbor.

In the second reading James wonders about those who look at themselves in a mirror and upon walking away forget who they are (James 1:23-24). For James, they are simply hearers of the word and not doers. Their lives do not reflect the love and mercy that has claimed them.

And so it is with us. We do not live as the people God has claimed us to be. Our lives lose their center. Our faith practices focus on surface things rather than the core. We fail to be what God has created and is creating us to be—vessels poured out for others. We look at ourselves in the mirror and upon walking away forget who and whose we are.

At the heart of the Christian assembly is Jesus—in word, in song, in prayer, in the neighbor, in water, bread, and wine. Jesus, who embodies forgiveness and mercy, is the heart. Again and again, life becomes misshapen. Again and again, the potter reshapes the clay. The splash of a watery cross, the taste of bread and wine: these things center life in Christ. God's mercy washes over us. God's mercy is implanted in us. God creates life anew; deformed hearts are reformed for works of mercy and love.



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