

Sunday, September 6, 2015, 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Call to Worship (please see bulletin)

Prayer of the Day

God, in Jesus Christ you make all things new.
This day is not like any other Sunday. It is your day.
We bring ourselves, our lives, our joys and trials today.
Embolden our voices in song and prayer.
So that you make our hearts new and renewed.
By your Spirit, refresh us to love and serve you more.
In God the Father, God the Son and in God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Call to Confession

God knows our hearts and understands our needs. And yet it still helps us to approach Him with the confidence of children, as we stand before the throne of grace confessing our shortcomings. Please pray with me in faith and in penitence.

Prayer of Confession (please see bulletin)

Assurance of Grace

True abundance does not come because of what we do
but because of the Person we know.
God invites us into a bounty of forgiveness, inviting you to share the same with others.

Friends, believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

Psalm 125:1-5 (PLEASE SEE BULLETIN)

TIME OUT FOR TEACHING: Who is James?

It was said that James was such a pious man, his knees were like a camel's, because he spent so much time on his knees in prayer.

James was a Jewish man, very well-versed in Old Testament teachings, brought up to believe in God's Law and that it was God's gift to the people.

We aren't sure who the James is who wrote the letter we have in the Bible. It was a very common Jewish name. We can observe from reading the letter that this man was a man who drew from ancient Jewish wisdom and good old fashioned common sense.

The letter of James is pious and practical. It speaks of how the word of God is the foundation for how we treat our neighbor and how to live a pure life.

This letter shows us that the author was also highly educated in the greco-roman philosophies of his time, and quite an accomplished writer. The Greek is highly developed, unlike what a traditional Jewish dude from Galilee. And yet, it also comes the same kind of Old Testament style wisdom literature.

The author of this letter may have been giving tribute or memorial to James the Apostle, who is best known for standing up before the other apostles in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15, as they debated what to do about those Gentiles who had begun professing their faith in Jesus. This man was well versed in Old Testament wisdom, and uses the scriptures to make sense of the Gentile phenomenon.

So who was James? A man well versed in scripture. A pious believer who also has common sense. A guy who placed a high value on wisdom and ethics. Sounds like someone we could enjoy a cup of coffee with.

Prayer for Illumination

As we read the words of scripture,
point us to your living Word who walked among us;
as we are surrounded by your Spirit, whispering words within our hearts and minds.
Inspire us in our hearing and reflecting,
that we may move beyond your words
into life-changing acts of grace, love, hope, and peace.
Amen.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

¹A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

²³for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

James 2:1-10, 14-17

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter."³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Sermon: Going to the Dogs

My parents have a white labrador named “Chance.” He’s getting up in years, but he still enjoys going for walks in the woods or by the pond. Chance is not allowed to jump on people or lick their faces. The reason is simple. When he goes for walks, he eats some pretty gross things. I won’t get into the details.

As cute and smart as dogs are in our culture, other cultures think dogs are dirty or even unholy in other cultures, for this very reason.

This is also why they were unclean creatures in Jesus’ time in the Jewish perspective. And it was why, when this Gentile woman approaches him seeking help for her daughter, he begins showing the difference between His people and her people is like the difference between children and dogs. Gentiles also ate some unholy foods, like foods sacrificed to idols. They didn’t follow Jewish Law and were therefore ritually unclean.

But he had to expect attention like this. Word about his power and mercy had already spread the countryside like wildfire. He couldn’t contain it anymore. His reputation preceded him and he could no longer limit his audience to just the children of Israel.

We don’t know for sure if all along he intended to heal the Gentiles. Perhaps he actually planned to reach out to them in the first place, and he was just testing their faith. Or maybe this woman in particular was able to persuade him to open his heart to the Gentile peoples. But what we do know is this miraculous conversation about dogs versus children was a pivotal point in his ministry and said something about the economy of God’s grace.

Their conversation is off to a shaky start.

For a Jew to call this woman’s culture “dogs” was derogatory. But in her culture, dogs were nearly holy creatures. In her culture, dogs were rather miraculous, capable of healing themselves of illness and injury by licking their wounds. Dogs were often buried with their

masters. So in getting to know her better, Jesus finds that she and her people found faith and strength in these common creatures.

Their conversation reflected a familiar conversation going on for Early Christians as they heard this story. For Gentiles had begun to sit up and take notice of the Church and would come to them seeking membership, a desire based on their faith, not on Jewish ancestry. Some of those Christians worried that their religion was going to the dogs. They were concerned that the Church would lose its purity if Gentiles were admitted. And still others felt it was fine, even necessary, to accept Gentiles with faith. The question was, what should be required of them – circumcision? Should they first become Jewish to join the church? Or shall they be accepted on faith alone?

They were there, like this Dog Woman, because they had found something special in the Church and they had faith growing inside.

We ask ourselves this too, when someone new comes along, especially when it's a person who is totally new to Christian tradition. We might naturally want to learn about that seeker's beliefs, which takes time and conversation. And it is up to all of us to befriend them. This does not mean our religion is going to the dogs. It means we are mediators of Jesus to them, by learning about a person and what they believe.

That's what's happening between Jesus and this woman. He discovers that dogs are important to her. It becomes a focus of their conversation. He finds out through speaking with her that she has a faith which is pure, hopeful and she has an urgent need.

There are many other wonderful messages which can be gained from reading this part of Mark. But what we have here is an invitation to befriend one another more deeply, discovering what matters to each other. Sit with someone different next Sunday. Go out to lunch with each

other afterwards. During Catch Up and Coffee or Potluck Suppers, visit with different people. Greet one another in public while you're out shopping. Make your faith known to one other. Get engaged in conversation about what is important to you. Faith and friendship are the keys which open the door, even for dog people. Amen.

Service of Holy Communion

Jesus met his disciples—women and men, young and old—

and invited them into his new life.

Jesus still meets his disciples—women and men, young and old—

and invites us into his new life.

That new life begins, as any life begins, with water and bread.

At this table, we receive the bread of new life.

At this table, we are called together from many individuals into one body.

At this table, we are strengthened to go answer Christ's call.

This table is not mine, and it does not belong to this church.

This is not a Presbyterian table.

All of us, no matter who we are, or what we have done, or where we are on life's journey, are as welcome here as Peter and Joanna and Mary and James were at the first table.

The risen Christ is the host, and he bids us come and celebrate the feast,

to know the power of resurrection, the joy of heaven, the glory of God's grace.

On the night of His arrest, our Lord Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying,

“Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And then when his disciples were finished eating, he took the cup, blessed it and gave it to them, saying,

“This is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this in remembrance of me.”

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Almighty God, maker of Heaven and Earth,

Out of your great love you made us and all creatures.

And we, even though fallen from perfection, have been lifted up by your Law and Grace.

You have given us prophets and teachers throughout history, calling us to your Law and Grace,

And yet even still, when we failed to listen, you sent us yourself, Jesus, to call to us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, walked the earth, healing and teaching your message of grace,

He ate with sinners, and he eats with us. He calls us to Follow Him and we will have new life.

And today as sinners forgiven with grace, we are called to this table to eat with him and each other further proclaiming his message of grace and love.

Let us pray

Almighty God, we bring here these gifts of wheat and grapes, fruits of your creation. Thank you for the strength they provide us. Make them vehicles of your grace and love. By the work of your Holy Spirit, make yourself known to us in these ordinary foods, that we shall be strengthened in faith and in body for any kind of service to which you call us. And strengthen

the whole church universal, that we may find unity and peace within thus proclaiming your good news throughout the world.

And wherever there is brokenness, help it to mend. For each and every need listed in our church's prayer list, we pray you fulfill it. Work your healing hand in Bill, Tom, Amy, Sharon, Bob, Jo and Jenna. Comfort and help Gilbert, Rudy and Gloria.

Grow our trust and faith that we can rely on your for comfort and hope in every time of trial. This we ask in the name of Jesus, our Savior, saying, "Our Father...Amen."

Announcements

Next Sunday we continue our “What’s a Presbyterian?” Summer Adult Education series on Sundays at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. It’s not too late to join in the conversation.

Ever had a question about God? The Bible? Or something theological? Your question might become the next sermon topic. Please write your questions down and drop them in the jar in the Narthex.