

## A NEW INTERPRETATION

Pentecost 15-B      September 2, 2018

Deuteronomy 4, James 1, Mark 7

For the past five weeks we've focused on the gospel readings from the sixth chapter of John, Jesus' "I am the bread of life" statements, and the importance of the Communion, the Eucharist, or what Martin Luther called "The Sacrament of the Altar" to both remember and receive Jesus. ("For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." [Matthew 18:20])

We've shifted back to Mark's gospel, where Jesus places the revered law and human tradition in perspective by telling the religious leaders—who see themselves as the guardians of the law—that our actions speak louder than our words; and being pure and undefiled is not about what goes into the body but rather, it is about the output. For followers of Jesus in today's church, that means: If we are a Word and Sacrament church, what counts is what happens after we've been nourished in the Word, washed by the water and fed with the bread and the wine.

Our second reading today is from the Epistle of James, a letter of instruction for the early Christian community. Tradition suggests that the author was James, the brother of Jesus; but as is common with many pastoral epistles, it is likely that a later writer wrote the piece and dedicated it to honor James.

If you've heard anything about Martin Luther and the letter of James, you've no doubt gathered that Luther wasn't particularly fond of it, calling it an "epistle of straw...for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." [*Luther's Works*, Volume 35, *Word and Sacrament*, p. 362.]

While Luther didn't see it as a necessary (or necessarily worthy) part of the canon of Scripture, he didn't burn that "straw epistle" either. "Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God's law. But to state my own opinion about it...I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works.... Second, its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ.... James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works..." [Ibid., p. 397; Citations by Mark Allan Powell in *Introducing the New Testament*, Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Copyright © 2009.]

I guess this was Luther being charitable: While James wasn't on his "Top Ten" list, he allowed that it could be useful for those who find it helpful. Suffice it to say that Luther was lukewarm, at best, about the letter of James.

Putting the readings together, we might think it hard to place a book of the law like Deuteronomy and the "straw epistle" of James in a group of readings where Jesus tells the religious leaders that rigid adherence to the law and human tradition that have been passed down are subject to interpretation in the light of what is best for God's children. In other words, the "zero-tolerance policy" of the Scribes and Pharisees needs to be weighed in the light of what people actually need here and now.

We profess that Jesus came to fulfill the law; and Christians are sometimes quick to decide that Jesus supersedes—and effectively, invalidates—the law. That would make "law" and "gospel" polar opposites in a zero-sum game. I'd like to suggest that Jesus sheds new light on what it

means to be God's people of the law. Law was given as a gift to identify and set apart children of the God of Abraham from other civilizations and cultures. Law marks God's people as God's own.

God is "making all things new" (See Revelation 21:5 and many other instances in both Old and New Testaments. What that means is God continues to mold and shape me. And as I grow and mature and am reshaped by God, so is my understanding of what God has to say to me. In other words, I am a different person; and I believe that happens because God continues to inform us and reach us in new ways. So even Scripture itself can be made new, when we read and re-read, when we study and reflect, when we open ourselves to hear the Word speak to us anew.

We might think of ourselves as a gospel or "good news" people; but that does not mean we discard or lessen the importance of the law, because the whole of Scripture informs us. So we don't see law and gospel as *either/or*, but *both/and*. We are all in the process of *becoming*—of growing into a fuller understanding of what it means to be children of God and followers of Jesus. That means we are always capable of being taught—a point I believe Jesus was trying to make to his friends and to the religious leaders in our gospel passage for today. Quoting Isaiah 29:13, Jesus reminded and warned the most zealous: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Yet those words reach out to warn and remind people today, so our hearts and minds will be in the right place. Jesus teaches us, in order that the words and actions that proceed from us do not defile us. As he invites us to experience him more fully in the gifts of the Table, we gather in community for that encounter. We begin by seeing the face of Jesus in those around us. And we are reminded to look for that face of Jesus in those we encounter beyond these walls, for they too are placed by God into our midst (and we into their midst, as well). We acknowledge that we all belong to God; and when we value others as God values them (and us), we will find that the words and actions that proceed from this place will truly be *good news* in the world. Amen.