

American Lutheran Church of Sun City

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Page | 1

August 31 – September 1, 2024

Rev. Scott Klimke

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

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

Twenty-two years ago, I was a newlywed and a seminarian beginning his internship year in a place not far from where the DuPont Company originated in the making of gunpowder. At about this time of year, I remember my supervisor being away on vacation, which meant I got to preach two weeks in a row. What a big deal that once was. Of the two sermons, one responded to Jeremiah's habit of having cranky, complaint-ridden conversations with God. Jeremiah had so many of these that we've come to call a cranky, accusatory fit "a jeremiad." As for the other sermon, it took up the familiar text where the first disciples are on the way, are on the way, only to have Jesus ask them and us, "Who do you, who do you as a group, say that I am?"

In their own way, today's texts remind me of this on-the-way question Jesus once asked in the vicinity of Caesarea Phillipi because they too are our on-the-way texts, journey and pilgrimage texts, which have to do with what at the time being is to distinguish us from everybody else. To start with Deuteronomy, Israel is still in the wilderness; still in between bondage in Egypt and freedom in the Promised Land when it receives the marching orders it's to keep and to guard religiously. Turning now to James, it's drawn from a letter that addresses itself

to the twelve tribes in dispersion or diaspora. As Israel was once exiled from the Promised Land by the Babylonians, James contends we now are exiled from our home in the Kingdom of God, making us at present aliens, strangers, refugees, and homeless. And as far as our reading from Mark is concerned, Jesus has by now called us away from the status quo and towards him and his kingdom, but even two thousand years later Christ's advancing kingdom has not yet come in full. Like the first disciples once questioned by Jesus near Caesarea Philippi, we're still on the way and this is to be remembered as we now start to dig even deeper into our appointed scriptures.

Think about it! On the way, in the middle of things, still in pilgrimage readings aren't around to describe what salvation will be like or how it is to be attained by sinners like us. The type of reading we have today is meant to lay out what we Christians are to be about as we together march toward Zion, the beautiful, beautiful city of God the book of Revelations tells us so much about. This is true even of our reading from James, despite some tricky language.

If you missed it earlier, the tricky, slippery language shows up halfway through the reading where it speaks of humbly welcoming the divine word implanted within in us which has the power to save our souls. Unless I'm very mistaken, when we hear of saving souls, we automatically think end of the line, at the pearly gates, salvation. But this instinct misses the mark when it comes to our reading from James. What precedes today's reading isn't talk about ultimate, final, all over at last salvation. The preceding point of concern involves the on-the-way tests and still-in-pilgrimage trials that can trip us up and send us south for a time if we're not careful. But as real and dangerous as these here-and-now tests and trials can be, our second reading contends that we'll ultimately overcome a world that wants to stain us and our souls really badly if we just welcome the divine word planted within us. What we have here is an on the way concern and an on the way solution. Should we humbly welcome the divine word

implanted in us we'll triumph over present trial and temptation and have more time for the way of God which is to occupy us as we continue to travel in the direction of the Kingdom of God which has drawn near in Jesus, but not yet arrived in full. Which is to say, even our reading from James is an on-the-way text meant to be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path as we await the fulfillment of our ultimate hopes as the Church. And if we have any questions about the way of God we are to travel until we're once and for all saved by God's grace in Christ through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith alone, today's scriptures do provide them.

From now until eternity, we're to humbly welcome the word of God implanted within us. Over the long haul, this lived submission to the word of God will help us to bring to light for others God's superior and alternative way and hopefully pull them away from flawed and fallible human traditions like those of the elders which Jesus rejects in our reading from Mark. Our reading from James certainly wastes no time in summarizing how a commitment to the word of God will take tangible form in our lives again and again. As we humbly welcome the divine word within us that can foil the world's desire to stain us and our souls, what we'll end up doing, James says, is take care of widows and orphans in their distress. And though he often marches to the beat of his own drummer, to the point that Luther questioned the inclusion of the letter bearing his name in the New Testament, James is most certainly within the mainstream here.

Care for the vulnerable, care for those without a safety net or life preserver, whether they be ancient orphans and widows or their modern-day corollaries, is a mission Scripture punctuates all the time. In the book of Deuteronomy, with all the commandments we are not to alter according to our first reading, extending care to widows and orphans is commanded ten, different times; with propertyless Temple priests and homeless strangers, aliens, and refugees often joining

the list. And this orientation towards the vulnerable is kept alive by the entire Bible just as our first reading desires.

When we limit our stats to just what's commanded in regard to widows, care for those with no social safety net is lifted up as a defining value of the people of God in both Testaments and in at least fifteen different biblical books. We're talking biblical bread and butter here. From now until eternity, we help those we have nowhere else to turn for help and maximize our chances of standing out from the crowd in a way that catches people's attention and turns them toward Christian discipleship when we endeavor to let no one slip through the cracks opened and often widened and deepened by human neglect and selfishness. As I've suggested more than once since our partnership began, this is to be and remain our mission until we arrive once and for all in the Kingdom of God. And I'm here to tell you that this is a blessed way to travel, just as our reading from James promises. It's a blessed thing to invite, welcome, feed, and include those who now live without the eternal safety net of salvation in Christ Jesus. It's a blessed thing to offer a helping hand to those in danger of drowning just because they don't have a life preserver.

If ever I doubted this, it evaporated after I slept on concrete floors or in cabins with Christian teenagers. Look. I've been in New Orleans where initial complaints about the humidity and unfamiliar cuisine gave way to a week where the kids insisted, we had to pack food for all the homeless people we were seeing. I've been at church camp when inclement weather bums the kids out and forces them inside, only to see a young man named Andy make the autistic kid everyone else was avoiding his partner in a very public game. I've been to Beckley, West Virginia, and seen how kids couldn't get enough of teaching illiterate children how to read. I've traveled the streets of Anacostia in the District of Columbia with kids ready to help plant urban gardens and to clean up parks once overrun by drug addicts and dealers. And I've been to Lynn,

Massachusetts where those living in the vicinity of Boston had a lot of needs. At first, some of the girls complained about having to slum it. Not very long after they apologized profusely because they'd come to realize those, they were helping were giving back more than they had received. And so, I very much know our reading from James isn't lying when it says the here-and-now blessings and benefits of discipleship shall very quickly make the here and now costs of discipleship a minor trifle soon forgotten. And so, should we ever fear being Christians who invite, welcome, feed, and include and who also care for the widow, the orphan, and whoever else may be perilously vulnerable, let's fear not. For with here and now contentment and blessing the here and now result of Christian discipleship, the truth is fear is the only thing we have to fear. Amen!