

October 2, 2022 Text: James 2:14-17, Exodus 22:21-27 “Sharing with the Vulnerable”

Exodus 22:21-27 puts together an interesting list of people: resident aliens (v. 21), widows (v. 22), orphans (v. 22) the poor (v. 25), neighbor (v. 26). Almost every day, I encounter at least one or two persons from that list. The writer of Exodus has named the most vulnerable in that society. (He must have sneaked ahead and looked at 2022. The list still makes sense.)

James 2:14-17 is a New Testament reminder that bopping along thinking that mere belief is enough is to miss a core reality. It isn’t faith in Jesus Christ unless it energizes works to help the hungry and the unclothed. In this passage, I hear an echo of Matthew 25:31-36. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And then Jesus gives the answer: “Truly, I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Jesus does not give us much room in which to hide!

The United Methodist Church has a Social Creed that closes with this statement: ”We believe in the present and final triumph of God’s Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. Amen.” (*The Book of Discipline* 2016, para. 166)

Scripture is clear that faith is not just a warm relationship with God.

October 9, 2022 Text: 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 21:1-4 “Widow of Zarephath and Widow’s Offering”

This week’s study texts give accounts of two women who please God by the generosity of their giving. Neither of them had much in Wells Fargo, but they emptied the account to give. When I typed the title of this lesson, I made a typographical error and put: “Widow of Zarephath and Window Offering.” Boy, would that have changed the meaning of the story! I suggested (by poor typing) that the widow made her gift in front of a window so all could see. Not so! In fact, if Jesus had not pointed it out, her generosity would have been silent and unnoticed.

On “Stewardship Sunday” at the church I attend, we were each given an envelope and a blank piece of paper. We were invited to write our pledge/tithe/offering amount on that paper. “Put it in the envelope; seal the envelope; and then sign your name on the back of the envelope.” Then the chair of our Finance Committee said, “Thank you. We are not going to open the envelopes. That is between you and God.”

Money. Let’s face it. Most of us undertaking this study are relatively comfortable in the dollars and cents department. Our next meal is probably already in the refrigerator. In the closet, there is a warm jacket we can wear when the fall weather takes a temperature dip. All of that makes it hard for us to hear our Lord speak negatively about those who have “contributed out of their abundance.”

October 16, 2022 Text: John 9:1-7, 35-38 “Jesus Sees the Man Born Blind”

If you could choose, had you rather be blind or be deaf? Had you rather miss seeing the gorgeous changing colors of the autumn trees or had you rather miss the playful laughter of grandchildren running back and forth in the yard?

Of course, most of us would clearly prefer not to have to make that choice! The prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the coming of the Messiah and saw a time of sight being given to the blind, hearing being given to the deaf, voice being given to the speechless, and leap- ing being done by the lame. (Isaiah 35:5-6)

So, when Jesus moves in his ministry of healing, his followers—the disciples—want to make sure they understand what is going on, so they ask him, “Was sin the cause of this blindness?” (John 9:2) A. M. Hunter notes: ”The disciples assume a necessary connexion between sin and suffering, as did many Jews, despite the passionate protest of Job.”

Our Lord moves the discussion to another level and says this blind- ness is now an occasion for showing how God works with healing power (John 9:3). Then, almost as if in an effort to draw attention away from Himself, Jesus sends the man on a rather complicated mul- tiple step process (v. 11). When the man gains his sight, he does not even know where Jesus is (v. 12).

Faith is empty (dead?) if it is not expressed in helping relationships with others. What does that look like? It looks like a food pantry for the needy. It looks like a prison ministry. It looks like a shut-in who prays every day for the needy. It looks like someone who asks the check-out clerk at the grocery store, “How are you doing?” It looks like an effort to control damage to the climate. It looks like an appeal to the legislature for fair tax laws. It looks like working to make life safer for the immigrant. It looks like a check mailed to a local chari- ty. It looks like a friendship with someone who is shamed because of a disability, sexual orientation, age, or mental limitations. There are about 8 billion people in the world...that’s a lot of “It looks like...”! Your list may look different from mine—we don’t always agree—but we cannot ignore James’ reminder about faith and works.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Ordained Ministry in The United Methodist Church* (GBHEM), William B. Lawrence has said: “It appears that the scriptural message pairs two principles. On the one hand, salvation is available not by law but only by grace, which comes through faith. On the other hand, faith is present with saving power only where it is practiced according to Christian discipline.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Bring my faith alive, O Lord...”

There is another component to life’s journey: time. Is it fair to say that we all have exactly the same amount of time each day? How do I spend my time? If I were to tithe my time, I’d give about two hours and 24 minutes a day to causes of service and witness and ministry. (And I’d probably stop complaining about having to get up early on Sunday in order to get to Sunday School on time.)

I know of one church that has a file of what different members of the congregation suggest for their own funeral services. In one of those folders, a member has asked that at his memorial service there be an offering taken for some community need. I’ve never been to a funeral where they took up an offering. Of course, I’ve never seen a widow “put in all she had to live on.” I wonder how Jesus feels about that fu- neral folder.

What Someone Else Has Said:

The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen (Abingdon) says: “By doing acts of mercy and charity, we acknowl- edge our dependence upon God, and his absolute right to whatever we possess through his bounty and goodness.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “It’s Yours, O Lord, so take it and use it...”

Physical blindness is only one of many ways in which we can be blind. Emotional blindness (“I don’t care what she is feeling.”) Spir- itual blindness. (“I don’t know anyone who can save me.”) Social blindness. (“I have to look out for number one.”) Psychological blind- ness. (“I don’t have any real feeling.”) Communal blindness. (“I don’t know anyone who cares about me.”) Regional blindness. (“I don’t care about those other people.”) Financial blindness. (“It does not matter how I spend my money.”) Relational blindness. (“I like you only if you can make me feel good.”)

The focal text says that Jesus was just walking along when He encoun- tered the blind man (v. 1). Our Lord is able to see us as we travel on life’s ordinary journeys. What blindness do I bring with me? If I am willing to let Jesus heal me, it will bring glory to God (v. 3).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Christine Harman (*For the Common Good*, Discipleship Resources) has written: “This may indicate that our understanding of healing should take a variety of forms and that, therefore, we would expect to see a variety of results.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Help me see, O Lord, by the Light of your presence...”

October 23, 2022 Text: Luke 18:1-8 “The Parable of the Widow and the Judge”

Jesus uses a story to make a point and then, boom!, He gives it a surprise ending.

After comparing the slow response of a judge who hears a widow’s plea for justice, Jesus says that God moves quickly to grant justice (v. 8). (The word translated “justice” is rooted in *ēkdikōs*, a term that in contemporary lingo might be rendered “create a level playing field.”) That seems like a good thing.

But then our Lord stirs the pot a bit more. Even though God answers prayer and makes things right, “...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8)

Oops! Do I respond to God’s faithfulness with faith?

Just when we get comfortable with this parable about God’s faithfulness in answering prayer, our Master turns the table and asks about our faithfulness.

Our faithfulness. I remember a friend from my days in seminary who said that we ought to pray both in word and deed. He said, “When I pray for the poor, my prayer can be said to come with faith if I am also contributing to the food bank.” Most of the time I can come up with a prayer “in word,” but sometimes I struggle to express that pray-

October 30, 2022 Text: Ezekiel 47:21-23 “Hospitality to Strangers”

This week’s focal text comes after some fairly complicated verses that contain words like Hethlon, Lebohamath, Zedad, Berothah, Sibraim, Damascus, Hamath, Hazerhetticon, Hauran, and Meribathkadesh (among others). The prophet is describing how the land is to be shared among the twelve tribes of Israel (v. 13). “You shall divide it equally” (v. 14). Tough job!

But that assignment may not be as tough as the verses in our study text. I can understand and pronounce the words (at least in English!), but how to apply their truth in 2022 is difficult. Lives are won and lost as these verses confront us.

The Israelites understood what it was to be strangers in a foreign land. Their experience in Egypt (as slaves) helped them see the plight of those who crossed boundaries. So now that they have their own land, the prophet is clear that they are to treat the “strangers” in their midst with the same grace they extended to themselves (v. 22).

There is much controversy about how to apply this text to our own country in these days of the 21st century. But, I want to complicate matters even more! (You’re welcome.) Strangers and aliens among us are not all from other countries. How about those whose sexual orientation makes them seem to be strangers in our midst? How about those whose skin color (or lack thereof) sets them apart as “alien” to our culture?

er “in deed.” Three weeks ago, in our study lesson we recalled that James wrote that “faith without works is dead.” (James 2:17) Is my prayer offered in faith if it is not accompanied by my action? I’m still pondering that possibility.

Jesus often used stories or parables to make a point. Those accounts make Gospel truth accessible. The Scripture is clear that these are stories (or parables) (v. 1) not news reports of actual events. In today’s focal text, Jesus tells the story and then draws attention to key elements in the story. Just in case His listeners have not understood, the Master also adds a few lines about what it all means.

It’s those “added lines” that challenge me in this text. I was doing all right with the parable until Jesus asked if faith would be found when push comes to shove (v. 8). Answering that question will open the door to prayer.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Frederick Douglass* (Simon and Schuster), David Blight wrote: “...Douglass argued that the ‘most effectual sort of prayer was doing and not saying.’ “

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Hear me, Lord, as I do...”

To what extent are those in poverty treated by different values than the wealthy?

Immigration is more than crossing national boundaries. We have many divisions that separate life into “us” and “them.” Whatever the presenting issue, Ezekiel says he is speaking for God (v. 23) when he admonishes the “in’s” to share the journey with the “out’s.”

Applying this instruction to our daily life is not simple or easy. After all, Ezekiel 47:13-20 is about how to divide land. It is to be divided equally (v. 14). How is life and respect and opportunity and caring and support to be divided equally? Where are the places of separation that need to be healed?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Calvin Coolidge is quoted in *The Soul of America* by Jon Meacham (Random House): “For differences of this kind will certainly be elements of strength rather than of weakness. They will give variety to our tastes and interests. They will broaden our vision, strengthen our understanding, encourage the true humanities, and enrich our whole mode and conception of Life.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of equal love...

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE ANSWERS

Across: 1 Repentance, 6 Anoint, 7 Steal, 9 Pierce, 10 Urn, 11 Heap, 14 Mist, 15 Eli, 16 Stream, 17 Sinai, 18 Nathan, 20 Gethsemane.

Down: 1 Run, 2 Philip, 3 Nature, 4 Answer, 5 Cherubim, 6 Alphaeus, 8 Lengthen, 9 Patience, 12 Isaiah, 13 Bronze, 14 Martha, 19 Axe.

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