

September 1, 2024  
Lectionary 22, Year B  
The 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Teachers

Yesterday was a long day for our family. Britton, John, Cyrus, my mom, and I left at 8:30 in the morning to take Julia to college at Salve Regina University. Once we got there we unloaded the car and, with a lot of help from the McCauley Movers, who were the Salve football team and others who had been recruited to help the freshmen move in, moved all of Julia's stuff into her dorm room. Then we helped her unpack. We moved her furniture to the way that she wanted. Cyrus and Britton put together her desk chair, mom made her bed, and she and I put away her clothes. Julia directed and helped with the whole process. John disappeared for a while and we learned that he had been helping other students carry their stuff into the building, and helping hold doors for people.

We had lunch in the dining hall and then Julia had orientation meetings. There were also orientation meetings for the families. Those meetings culminated in a beautiful service of welcome and blessing for families. After that we went to dinner with Julia, back at the dining hall, and then it was time to say goodbye. There weren't too many tears at our farewell, at least not until John and Julia decided to sing the Irish blessing to each other, in harmony, an arrangement that they had learned in high school chorus, "May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be always at your back, may the sun shine warm upon your face and the rain fall soft upon your fields. And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand."

It was beautiful. It was a lot.

And then there were hugs, kisses, goodbyes, and Julia went back into her dorm and we went to our cars and drove away.

Last weekend we took Abigail to college for her junior year. One would think we would be getting used to these goodbyes by now. But still, it's pretty intense. The child population in our house has been cut in half. And it all seemed to happen so fast.

When your kids are little, it feels like they'll always be there with you, like you'll have all the time in the world with them, all the time in the world to enjoy them, all the time in the world to teach them, train them, impart what you want to impart to them. And then one day, you're leaving them in another state, with all of their stuff, and driving away. And until you meet again, may God hold them in the palm of his hand.

At one of the family orientation sessions that we had, the director of security at the university warned us from his own experience with his own kids that they would most likely be back after college, while they get their feet under them for their adult lives, but still, it will never be quite the same. We took our children to college. When they come back, they'll be adults, in mind as well as age, with their own ideas, their own experiences, new relationships, their own world-views, shaped by more than just us.

I was thinking about all of this, the big change that was coming to our household as I read this week's scripture readings. They struck me as great readings for back-to-school season, whether the children in question are starting pre-school or heading for college.

Listen to this, from Deuteronomy, "So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you." (Deuteronomy 4:1)

As the Israelites were about to start a new life in a new land, they were told to stop, to listen to the law, the word of God, to learn it, to take it into their hearts, to take it into their lives, to let it shape them, to let it shape the way that they would live in the new land.

The law, the ways that they were being called to live was intended to show their close relationship with God and to display the wisdom that God had poured out on them. They were told to watch themselves closely, so that they would never forget all that they had seen and heard, of God's goodness, of God's wisdom, of the care that God had shown them and the ways in which God had taught them to walk. And they were called to teach this law and wisdom to their children and to their children's children.

And then in the reading from James, we hear the call to be doers of the word, and not just hearers. God's words are not just supposed to go in one ear and out the other, like the voices of the adults in the Peanuts cartoon "Wah, wah, wah wah, wah wah". They are supposed to shape our lives for love, for mercy, for charity, for compassion. The religion that we are called to practice, is worship, is hearing of God's word, but it more than that. It is a living of God's word, in our daily life. James says, "Religion 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." (James 1:27)

These are powerful words to hear as one sends one's child off to college. And I have to wonder, is this what she, is this what they have learned at their parents' knees. To hold God's words close, to care for those in need, and to keep themselves unstained by the world; unstained by the world's cynicism and consumerism and selfishness and violence and lack of compassion?

In the gospel reading for today we hear a strong critique of those who have learned the letter of the law, but who have failed to embrace its spirit. Because it was the law that people not eat with unwashed hands, but according to Jesus, what

was of more concern to God was not what went into the body, through the medium of unwashed hands, but what comes out of the body, the evil that comes from the heart.

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

Jesus' concern was not about people who were not keeping the letter of the law. Jesus' critique was of people who were not living in the spirit of the law, on people who were focused on the minutia of the law or who were using the law as a cover for excluding people, or for parading their morality in public, while in private, living in ways that were harmful or hateful or prideful.

Once again, the question rises to my mind, what have my children learned from me, and learned from the communities of faith to which I have exposed them, and the communities of faith that I have led? Have they learned to honor God with their lives rather than just with their words?

You can see why this week's readings really hit me where I've been living. You see, I thought I had all of the time in the world, with these kids. It felt like they would be with us forever. It seemed like they would always be little, babies, toddlers, preschoolers, elementary schoolers, middle schoolers, high schoolers. Of course, we knew they were getting older, but still we were somewhat blinded to what that all meant, that someday our nest, room by room, one by one, would start to empty, and instead of saying, see you tomorrow, we would be saying, see you in two weeks, in two months, when we parted.

Now we can count on one hand the number of years we have left before Cyrus goes to college. Five years. And he's our youngest. Just five more years for him. Three for John. Time flies.

And do we have time to teach them what we want them to know, what we need them to know, what the world needs them to know, about faith, about God's love, about God's compassion, about God's wisdom, that is their legacy and their baptismal calling?

Maybe you've already been through all of this, with your own kids, who are now full-grown adults, perhaps with kids of their own. Maybe you never had children, so can only imagine what I'm talking about. Maybe you think this sermon doesn't have much to say to you, maybe you think you don't have anyone to teach or at least, that you haven't for a long time.

But we all are teaching, all the time, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to honor God with our words and with our lives. What it means to let God's wisdom, God's compassion shape our lives.

We're teaching our children and grandchildren, whether they come to church or not. We're teaching the children who are a part of our congregation. We're teaching our friends and the people in our community.

We're teaching. By what we do and what we don't do, by the words we say, by what we post on social media, by the way we prioritize worship, by the way that we prioritize our church, our Christian community, by the way we remember others, by the way we remember God, by the way that we trust that God is with us, day by day, in every aspect of our lives.

Every day, everywhere, we are teaching someone what it means to be a Christian, even if we don't know it, don't realize it, don't see it. Hopefully we are teaching what we want to be teaching, what we are called to be teaching, about the God of wisdom, the God of compassion, the God of love. For that is our calling and the time is flying. Amen.