

Disagreement by Design [OR Labor Day as a Call to Love]

Mark 7:24-37 and James 2:1-10, 14-17

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on September 5, 2021

I'm part of a group of friends that gets together every month or so to catch up over supper. The pandemic slowed us down with the occasional zoom attempt filling the gap, but we eventually reconnected in person. Between us, we cover a wide range of politics, vocations, hobbies, and humor. Supper conversations include debates, questions, bad jokes, and fun facts. Only occasionally do we go off the rails, and love seems to get us back on track. I mention this because the Bible is kind of like Supper Club – an ongoing internal argument exists between the threads of agreement. Throughout the centuries, attempts have been made to resolve disagreements between the books of the Bible – and sometimes within a book itself when several authors seem to have written it – with a technique called “harmonizing.”¹ Harmonizing attempts to make the Bible agree with itself, smoothing over conflicting stories and theologies. Not only does harmonizing the Bible distort softer voices, but it's a disservice to the writers who were each inspired by the Holy Spirit. It's a bit like telling my Supper Club friends that we're all really saying and believing the same thing which simply isn't true. Which is one way to introduce the Bible's book of James.

We're in the second of five weeks of James' readings during Sunday worship. Here's a reminder to go ahead and read the book. It's five brief chapters that read kind of like the book of Proverbs or wisdom literature in the Old Testament. But these blurbs about right living are delivered with strong words and severe consequences. Jesus' second greatest commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is quoted in the James' reading today.² Except, here in James, it's called “the royal law.” And goes on to say that “faith without works is dead.” If you were handed the book of James as your introduction to the Bible, you might pause to wonder who could possibly attain the pure life it demands. Martin Luther even rejected it as an “epistle of straw” for its lack of grace, preferring instead Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the second chapter, that emphasizes being saved by grace through faith and not by works, so that no one may boast.³

¹ Bart Ehrman (James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at UNC Chapel Hill). “Harmonizing the Gospels.” September 11, 2013. The Bart Ehrman Blog: The History & Literature of Early Christianity. <https://ehrmanblog.org/harmonizing-gospels/#>

² Jesus' second greatest commandment can be found in Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27.

³ Ephesians 2:8-9

Regardless of Luther's frustration with it, the book of James has its place in the Bible. It has its place when there's so much need that we turned inward. It has its place when our faith becomes a wall, blocking out other people for any reason. Like a hero in a movie gripped by hysteria, a hero who is slapped across the face and shocked into calm and courage, James is the persuasion that we sometimes need to keep going on behalf of our neighbor. James brooks no argument and accepts no excuses while making Christian vocation crystal clear.

There's no time like Labor Day weekend to talk about vocation. For most folks, vocation means the work we do at our jobs. In church, vocation describes our calling as Christians. Martin Luther's interpretation of scripture in the early 16th century leveled the playing field between clergy and everyone else.⁴ Back in his day, there was no holier calling than a vocation as a priest in the church. Luther argued that all Christians are priests belonging to the "priesthood of all believers;" called by Christ into the holy work of being Christ in the world through their vocations. Jobs of every kind are Christian vocations because Christians have all kinds of jobs – custodian, student, accountant, journalist, politician, homemaker, nurse, cashier, soldier, and so on; and Christian vocations are also calls on us through our relationships – parent, child, sibling, aunt, uncle, and grandparent are all vocations.

Like our ancestors in the faith who wrote the Bible, today's Christians often disagree about what Jesus calls his disciples to do vocationally. Interpretations of parables and stories vary wildly. James' high standards for faithful Christian vocation and Mark's story about Jesus and the Syrophenician woman are one example. To hear James tell it, the only way to live out Jesus' call to us is by the purest level of works on behalf of the neighbor in Jesus' name. But the story in Mark argues that God's purposes are manifested in the actions of unexpected people without a confession of faith. The Syrophenician woman was a Greek by religion and language who lived at the seashore miles away from Galilee. The Gospel of Matthew says she was a Canaanite but we're not going to get hung up on that discrepancy.⁵ (Although, it'd be fun to argue whether or not that's an

⁴ Art Lindsley, Vice President of Theological Initiatives, Institute for Faith, Work & Economics. "The Priesthood of All Believers." October 15, 2013. <https://tifwe.org/resource/the-priesthood-of-all-believers/#:~:text=When%20Luther%20referred%20to%20the%20priesthood%20of%20all,a%20%E2%80%9Cvocation%E2%80%9D%20and%20milking%20the%20cow%20was%20not.>

⁵ Matthew 15:22

important distinction.) The woman was a Gentile, a non-Jew, who demanded that Jesus help her. Two ways to read this text include a sly Jesus or an earnest Jesus.⁶ If sly, Jesus knew just what to say to draw this woman into speaking her mind. If earnest, Jesus shared a bias with his peers and needed a push to learn and respond to her in love.

Some people, including me, find it difficult to think that Jesus needed to learn anything and prefer thinking that sly Jesus had the whole interaction figured out, mostly because the way he calls her a dog sounds incredibly offensive. While other people love the idea that earnest Jesus had something to learn as his ministry grew and this Gentile woman was key to that process as an outsider. Regardless, does her faithful act qualify as a work according to James? She didn't confess Jesus as Lord. She bowed to him and then argued that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the kids' table. That was it. Then Jesus healed her daughter because of what she said. It's such an odd and offensive story that theologians will likely debate it until kingdom come. One thing seems clear though. Jesus both pushed, and was pushed into, an ever-expanding ministry that included unlikely people. It's why when some of us read the royal law in James, to love your neighbor as yourself, it becomes the cross-heavy hill we're willing to die on because it's the vocation we think Jesus calls us into through stories like the Syrophenician woman's.

Labor Day is intended as a rest from the vocational labors that fill our days. I hear it from a different angle this Sunday through these particular Bible readings. I hear it as an invitation to consider our vocations through Jesus' call. As we labor, we love our neighbor as ourselves in our workplaces, in our family relationships, and in our local and global relationships. Ultimately, though, Jesus is bigger than our arguments about vocation and greater than our limited capacity to live it out. Jesus' disciples are a Supper Club of a different kind –sustained by a simple meal of bread and wine while the waters of baptism wash over us daily, freeing and forming us into lives that are ever more Christ-shaped. Thanks be to God and amen.

⁶ John Marboe, Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN. Mark 7:24-37, September 2, 2021. God Pause: A Daily Devotion by Alumni of Luther Seminary. www.luthersem.edu/godpause/2021/09/02/