

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 20 September 2009

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

*Lessons: Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37*

In our collect we ask God to help us “not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”

That prayer could be seen as an expression of a dreadful stereotype of Christians as focusing entirely on life after death, while ignoring life here and now, as being people who do not care about whether people are starving or homeless, but only if they have signed up with a church which can guarantee them entry into the next life.

I have never seen any evidence of that attitude here at Saint James – or in the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. But we do pray that prayer often. It is all a question about what we mean by ‘earthly things’ and ‘heavenly things’.

James in his epistle clearly links wisdom, peaceableness, and loving service with God, with ‘things heavenly’. And he puts envy and conflict and greed among the ‘earthly things’.

The gospel reading once again reminds us that fixing on human preferment, on fame and pride of place, on our own desire for respect and honor is fixing on things earthly, is turning away from God. To connect with God one must connect with other people in an attitude of service.

In the Thursday Bible study this week we talked about how our lives are our answer to Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” This seems to me to be dealing with the same issues. How do we live so that we are focusing on ‘heavenly things’, not ‘earthly things’? What do people see in our lives that shows how we understand Christ, understand God? What do people see in our lives that shows what things we consider to be heavenly?

If we ignore people in need, are rude to our neighbors, argue with our fellow parishioners and gossip about them, while faithfully coming to worship and claiming a deep relationship with God (like the people James found so frustrating in his church), then people will see that we think that God only cares about what we say in worship and that Jesus is all about life after death. ‘heavenly things’ are other-worldly, unconnected with mortal life.

But if we feed the hungry, speak kindly to our neighbors, cooperate with our fellow parishioners, and work with them to see to the needs of our community (like joining in the Race for a Cure this weekend), while

praying faithfully and gathering for shared worship, then people will see that we believe that Christ is connected to everything we do here and now and that God cares about our whole selves and about everyone else as well.

Things earthly versus things heavenly – or in other words spiritual things versus worldly things.

I once read a definition of spirituality as all about connectedness – connectedness to God, connectedness to other people, connectedness to our own deepest selves, connectedness to all creation. To be spiritual is to be connected. To be connected means to experience the joy and pain of everyone. A spiritual person cannot be disentangled from her family, community, country, planet, universe. So to be worldly does not mean to be part of the world. It is the spiritual person who is truly part of the world. To be worldly means to be focused on me, to pull in all my connections, so that I only focus on what I want and on everyone else in terms of how they give me what I want, in terms of wealth, power, respect, whatever.

Focusing on ‘earthly things’ means climbing to the top and pushing everyone else aside and down. Focusing on ‘heavenly things’ means plunging into the midst of life, swimming in the sea of everyone’s needs, everyone’s joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats.

In our reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, the earthly, worldly, Godless people look at the faithful person and see him rejecting all of their ambition and envy and self-seeking. They see how the faithful person understands God and it makes them mad – so they determine to destroy him. We are called to live in a way that shows people who God, but warned that this may not always make for great popular success.

The passage finishes by saying, “Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.” They did not understand the ‘heavenly things’. But the person who did was able to connect with God, to be part of God’s action in the world, live among ‘heavenly things’ even while being persecuted.

In practical terms, how do we do this? How do we, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, focus on the things of God, focus on living out our understanding of who Christ is in our lives?

When we talked about this in Bible study, we talked about how our fundamental understanding is that God is love, love that created and embraces everyone, about how Jesus is God, and therefore is love, about how the basic rule of life he gives us is to love everyone as he has loved us – so that seemed to mean that our lives accurately answer the question of who we say that Christ is when they are lives of love and service.

When we feed a hungry person, not because we will get points with God, but because we care about that person – we are showing the Christ we know.

When we are thoughtful with one another at the picnic, rejoicing in fellowship – we are showing the Christ who celebrated with his friends at the wedding feast in Cana and on so many other occasions.

When we race for the cure, sleep in for the cure, worship for the cure, because we love people whose lives have been disrupted or ended by cancer, we are showing the Christ who loves all the sick and suffers with all the suffering.

When we bring our very best gifts, our best ideas, the first fruits of our money and material things, our time and our energy to the work of the parish, we show that we meet Christ here and we know other people will also.

We show the world who we say that Jesus is by everything we do and say.

And because we know that God made us each unique, we expect that how our understanding is shown in each life will be unique, will be reflected in how we are bookkeepers or clerks or doctors or lawyers or police or whatever. Our individual gifts and callings are part of our relationship with God and our connection to God's world. Our spiritual lives are our whole lives.

One of the reasons we celebrate the many heroes and saints of our faith is because of our connectedness through time and space, but also because each of them used his or her own gifts in a unique situation to be in relationship with God and to show forth his or her answer to the question of who Christ is.

That they are all so varied helps us to be free to follow our different paths.

On Thursday we celebrated a favorite saint of Deacon Mimi's and mine, Hildegard von Bingen. She was a domineering person who might have been rather difficult to know. But she had truly extraordinary gifts which continue to bless the world. A woman of medieval Germany, she founded and led monasteries, she preached in big cities, she was sought out for advice by many people, including popes and emperors, she did extensive botanical and medical research, she wrote and illustrated books based on this work. And she created extraordinary music, all while suffering regular bouts of debilitating illness. Many of us continue to listen to her music, which is regarded as unique by musicologists.

Her music was used as part of the worship of her monasteries. Unlike the calm and tame music of her time, Hildegard's pieces are filled with passion and energy, requiring great exertion to perform. People were said to sometimes pass out from exhaustion from singing her extraordinary music.

Hildegard loved God and God's creation, delighting in everything beautiful, which she praised in ecstatic poetry. She understood music not merely as one of the greatest sources of beauty in God's world, but as a key spiritual tool – a way to connect to ourselves, to one another and to God. One Hildegard scholar writes: (Dr Nancy Fierro, csj) "Hildegard believed that many times a day, we fall out of sorts, lose our way or find ourselves off center. Music was the sacred technology which could best tune humanity, redirect our hearts toward heaven and put our feet back onto the wholesome ways of God. In singing and playing music, we integrate mind, heart and body, heal discord between us, and celebrate heavenly harmony here on earth." Music is our way to become one with God and the angels.

Hildegard answered the question of who Christ is, by giving everything she had to the service of Christ, his church, and the suffering of the world, by appreciating and extolling the extraordinary beauty in all creation, and by creating more beauty.

Each of us is created unique. God has given us each unique hearts and hands and minds with which to connect. God has filled the world with 'heavenly things', all those things God called good at the creation.

Each time we sing, remember what Hildegard believed about the power of music to make us one with God and the angels, and think of how God is acting in your life, inviting you to act with him, using your gifts and talents to show forth his love and glory in all the world.

Think of feeding hungry, visiting the shut in, giving rides to church or the doctor, donating to the needs of the church and the community, comforting friends, partnering in prayer, celebrating community at the picnic, in music, in worship – think of all this as our way to be part of God's actions, to connect and be spiritual beings, focusing on things heavenly – all things created and loved by God.