

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Pentecost 14

Mark 7:1-2a, 5a, 6, 14-15a, 21b; Isaiah 29:13-14, 16-19, 22-24

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Salem, Bridgeport**

“A Matter of the Heart”

You should've gotten a sheet of paper and a pencil when you came into church.
The paper is divided into four quadrants which we're going to take just a few moments to fill out.

In the first quadrant I want you to list your three greatest accomplishments in this life.

Jesus told a parable about how we're each given certain talents/gifts,
and we're expected to use those gifts to produce results.

So what are your three greatest accomplishments, your three greatest successes,
the three things in which you used your gifts to the fullest?

(30-45 seconds of silence for people to write)

OK. Now in the top, right-hand quadrant it asks for your greatest failure,
the thing you feel most ashamed or guilty about, the thing that you most regret.
I won't actually ask you to write it down, but I will give you a few moments to think about it.

(10-15 seconds of silence for people to think)

Alright. Now we're in the third quadrant on the bottom left
and I want you to think about the best friend you ever had
and then name five reasons that person was your best friend,
how you knew that person was your best friend,
what that person did that made them your best friend.

(25-50 seconds of silence for people to write)

Now we go to the final quadrant on the bottom right –
and again you don't actually have to write this part down, but it's important to think about.
How does your relationship with God compare to that relationship of your best friend?

(15-30 seconds of silence for people to think)

So for me, my best friend was always there for me.
My best friend and I talked every day. If I didn't call them, they called me.
My best friend was the one I called whenever something great happened
or whenever something awful happened.
My best friend and I cried together, we laughed together, and we worked together,
helping and encouraging and supporting one another.
I knew my best friend would love me no matter what.

So the criteria I use to check on, analyze, evaluate my relationship with God,
are the same ones I use when thinking about my best friend.
It's God always there for me? Do I know God is always there for me? Am I always available to God?
Is God the first person I call to talk with about the good things and the bad things in my life,
the joys and the sorrows, the gifts and the challenges?
Do I pour out my heart to God in times of sorrow and in times of joy?
Do I spend a lot of time with God? Do we cry together and laugh together and work together?
And in all these things I'm talking about doing them in an intentional, conscious, and personal way.

So to get from this questionnaire to our gospel and our old testament reading for the day
I'm going to take you on a slight detour.

I think everybody here remembers the story of the prodigal son,
but in case anybody is watching who hasn't read it,
it's about a dysfunctional family comprised of a father and two sons.

The older son is the "good" son who does what he's told –
he grows up and works in the family business, and does what is expected of him.

The younger son is the "bad" son who can't wait to leave home.
He asks his father for his inheritance ahead of time and goes off and lives life to its fullest,
doing everything that he can to please himself.
But he ends up squandering everything, running out of money and friends, his life falls apart,
and he is forced to return home in shame and beg his father for a job as a servant.

The father sees him coming, runs to meet him, throws open his arms, embraces him,
and with tears flowing down his cheeks and his heart overflowing with joy,
he decides to throw him the best party ever.

The older son, however, does not share in the rejoicing, because his heart is full of anger and resentment.
He says, "I can't believe it! I have done everything to please you, father!
I have stayed home, I have worked hard, I have done everything that was expected.
My brother has done everything wrong and here you are giving him the party!"

The point of a parable is that neither son understood.

The younger son never appreciated his father's love, never even saw it,
because if he had he would never have wanted to leave home.

But the older son didn't get it either.

He never appreciated his father's love, never even saw it,
and instead kept trying to earn that which he already had.

He saw living with his father, working for his father, as a chore, as a task, as work,
as a way to earn his father's love, a way to achieve his own success, a way to meet society's expectations.

Neither son understood what it was like to live in the embrace of their father's love.

Neither son understood that working for their father was an opportunity for joy.

I wanted to take you on that detour to get us to the point where Jesus is talking about
rules & regulations & customs & traditions & gaining approval & meeting expectations & earnings success.
Jesus says that's not what life is about.

It's not about how good or bad we are, it's not about whether we succeed or whether we fail,
it's not about achieving success, or earning approval, or meeting expectations.

It's about living in the light and the joy of God's love.

When we finally meet God face-to-face in heaven, we're likely going to arrive with the top half of our sheet.

The older son inside of us is going to have our list of accomplishments
and the younger son inside of us is going to have our list of failures, our shame, and our guilt.

And we're going to want to hide the younger son list behind our backs
and hold out our older son list of accomplishments to God.

And what Jesus says is, God is not interested in either list.

What God is interested in is being our best friend, and having us see God as our best friend.

And God does not want us to wait until that final moment when we return home & are caught up in God's arms
to understand how much God loves us.

God doesn't want us to be like that younger son,
not understanding, not being aware, not recognizing how much God loves us
and running away to try to live a life outside of God's love.

And God does not want us to be like that older son who keeps doing things because they're expected,
because we're trying to meet expectations or gain approval or win favor,
In the end it doesn't matter if we spend our whole lives running away from God to please ourselves,
or working hard to please God,
because EITHER way we've missed out on what is right there in front of us –
and behind us and beside us and below us and above us and in us!

That's what's going on in today's gospel: Jesus was not interested in the rules;
he was interested in a love relationship with God and with ALL of his brothers and sisters in God's family.

That's why Jesus stood up for the people who weren't following the rites & rituals and the rules & regulations
and that's why he quoted Isaiah saying that God is not interested in our worship or our religious practices

It's not about our worship, but about our hearts.

It's not about which liturgy we use or don't use, or which hymns we sing or don't sing,
or what style music we use or what instruments are used,
or which lectionary we follow or don't follow,
or whether we worship in a church building or a picnic grove or on zoom or on Facebook or not at all.

Those are all surface things.

The only thing about worship that matters is where our heart is.

Worship is what happens the moment when we make our way towards God and God catches us up in his arms.

True worship happens any moment when you realize how much God loves you
and you are overcome with an experience of that love, and KNOW God loves you.

It's not about remembering the fact that God loves you – not that kind of knowing,
but knowing to the depths of your mind and heart and spirit and body that God loves you,
by being so blown away by that knowledge that there's nothing else

except you and God in that moment, in that place, in that holy embrace where nothing else matters.

That can happen anytime and anyplace, alone or in the presence of others, in church or outside of church.

And then, when we come together to worship on Sundays

it's about remembering that feeling or experiencing that feeling again or sharing that feeling
so that others can have their hearts transformed by the awesome power of that love
and find that everything in their life changes, too.

Some of us here have been that younger brother and we returned home to God's loving arms.

Some of us here have always been that older brother, who keep trying to be the best that we can be
to obtain the approval of God, of others, and even of ourselves.

But until we reach the point where we find ourselves in God's arms, overcome by God's love & mercy & grace,
and filled with nothing but gratitude and thanksgiving and joy,
we haven't begun understand what life is all about.

It's not about how or when or where we worship.

It's not about the rites and rituals, the rules and regulations, the customs and traditions.

It's not about whether we run away from God or work all of our lives trying to obtain God's approval.

It's not about whether we succeed or fail.

It's not about how much or how little we try.

The bottom line is that it's a matter of the heart –

it's simply about knowing how much God loves us
and learning to live in the light of that love. **Amen**