

Pentecost 15, Year B
September 2, 2018
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The primary story of the Bible is of the love God has for us, all of us, and the lengths to which God has gone to share that love with us. From the beginning, when God created us in God's image and gave us life, we have had the opportunity to live in relationship with God and each other in ways that reflect that love. All three of today's readings show us a facet of how we can experience and share God's love.

The Song of Solomon raises up for us the gift of love between two people. Often chosen as a reading for weddings, as Doug and Carla can attest from their service this May, it is poetry that expresses the value of love in a human relationship. The Song affirms the love between the woman, who has the primary voice, and her beloved. The images used to describe their romantic love also embody those of a love for the creation and creatures of God, using metaphors of spring, new life, and the promise of fruitfulness. It is a reading that conveys an understanding of human love as a gift from God, one that is raised up in gratitude and belongs among the diverse expressions of praise and thanksgiving in the Bible.

In the Gospel reading we encounter the Pharisees. The Pharisees get harsh reviews in Mark. As faithful Jewish people, they understood the Law as a gift from God, one designed to help them live in right, loving relationship with God

and each other. The Pharisees dedicated themselves to following the Law as fully and completely as they could. They extended the laws of priestly purity to include themselves and other ordinary Jews, so that all God's people could be a priestly people to be pleasing to God. So when they noticed Jesus and his disciples not observing these traditions, they asked why. Jesus, sounding exasperated, clarified that this is not the expression of love God is looking for. This kind of particularity excludes a huge number of people and places one's focus on the wrong thing. What shows our love for God is what comes out of us, not what goes into us.

Today's epistle highlights this shift in focus. We have been given love from God. Our response is intended to grow from that love, **"...so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."** We need to live out of the love we have been given. To do that James says, **"...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."** It's the difference between talking the talk and walking the walk. One is supposed to lead to the other. When illustrating what characterizes **"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God,"** James does not point to theology or liturgy but **"to care for orphans and widows in their distress...."** It is the practical, tangible expression of love and compassion for the most vulnerable among us that James lists first.

It is a temptation to do what Jesus criticized the Pharisees for: **"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your**

tradition!” Our desire to follow what we think is right can lead us to concentrate on form rather than substance. It wasn't just Pharisees who were called hypocrites. James challenges us to look into the mirror and see ourselves as God might see us, then be willing to grow and change as God leads us. None of us are perfect, and thank goodness there is no expectation of that, for to be perfect is to be complete and we are still a work in progress.

This weekend we celebrated the lives of two people who embodied great love in very different ways. On Friday we remembered Aretha Franklin, the daughter of a Baptist minister who became a Gospel singer at her father's church and then joined him on the road when he toured as a guest preacher. She released her first Gospel record at the age of 14 and went on to build an incredibly successful career as both a Gospel and later secular music performer, eventually becoming known as The Queen of Soul. Her assessment of her own talent was to say, **“Being a singer is a natural gift. It means I'm using to the highest degree possible the gift that God gave me to use.”** A self taught pianist, Aretha Franklin was tremendously accomplished: she was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, was named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as the number one Greatest Singer of All Time, won 18 Grammy awards, and multiple American Music Awards. An icon of strong, black womanhood, Ms. Franklin used her talent and fame to benefit both the Church and her community. She supported a wide

array of charities, mentored other black women artists, and showed up in a multitude of ways to share her love saying, **“Being the Queen is not all about singing... It has much to do with your service to people. And your social contributions to your community and your civic contributions as well.”**

On Saturday we remembered John McCain, US Naval Academy graduate, fighter pilot, war hero, Congressman and Senator from Arizona, and Presidential candidate. Even with all of these roles and titles, according to Senator McCain’s daughter Meghan, they are not what defined him. What defined him was love. He loved his country, he loved the Navy, he loved the people of Arizona, and he loved his family. What she experienced most clearly and directly were the many ordinary, daily, and constant ways in which he showed his love for her. What shone through the words of numerous friends, colleagues—and most notably the political opponents who spoke at his funeral— is that John McCain was a man who was consistent in walking his talk. He had tremendous love and passion. That love showed in all that he said and did. He was a notably imperfect man, honestly described as a trouble making plebe at the Naval Academy, as a man who had a combustible temper, and as someone who would insist he was right but also apologize when proved wrong, he won the respect of many even when they disagreed. It was due to his commitment to right relationship that John McCain would not

betray his country or his fellow captives despite years of torture in the Hanoi Hilton. In his eulogy President Obama acknowledged the challenge of choosing love and integrity in the face of adversity by sharing one of John McCain's favorite quotes: **"Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today."** It was because of his love and commitment to doing what was right that John McCain cultivated a practice of reaching across the aisle in politics to accomplish what was needed for the people of Arizona and for his country. This enabled him to work with a former political rival with whom he often vociferously disagreed, moving President Obama to say, **"We never doubted we were on the same team."**

The question for us is how we too, as people of God, can respond with love and integrity to live out our unique lives in thanks to God and in service to God's people. We have gathered here today to hear the Word of God, to receive the love of God, and to be changed by the Presence of God. Our mission as we go out into the world is to be people who embody that love for others.

Amen