

**Opening Prayer**

**Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.**

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13**

<sup>2:8</sup> The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. <sup>9</sup> My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. <sup>10</sup> My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; <sup>11</sup> for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. <sup>12</sup> The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. <sup>13</sup> The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

**Commentary**

Now we leave the world of tribal conflicts, royal intrigues, and divine judgments to enter a world of romantic relationship. Traditionally, Song of Solomon has been interpreted as a spiritual allegory, either about love between God and the people of Israel or about Christ and the church (or individual soul). A parallel is drawn between the relational and physical love between a man and a woman and the spiritual love between God and persons. Increasingly, however, scholars interpret the Song as secular love poetry. It expresses the tensions of newfound love experienced in an atmosphere of disapproval. It describes mutual love where neither lover dominates the other or submits to the other. It delights in female sexuality (in contrast to much of the Bible where women's sexuality is chaotic, dangerous and defiling to men). In short, if we read Song of Solomon as it stands, it calls us to reexamine our assumptions about human sexuality and intimacy, including our tendencies to disapprove of certain kinds of loving relationships because they are "different" than the average "approved" relationships.

**Reflection**

How can we know when to take the Bible literally and when to look for symbolic meanings? If we read the poem as a Jewish or Christian allegory of a spiritual relationship between God and persons, what is it saying? If we read it as love poetry, what assumptions about love relationships does it challenge? What personal meanings do you find in this?

## **James 1:17-27**

<sup>1:17</sup> Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup> In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. <sup>19</sup> You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup> for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

<sup>21</sup> Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. <sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup> For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup> But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing. <sup>26</sup> If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> 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.

### **Commentary**

James has five basic assumptions in the first chapter. First, we live under a God who exalts the lowly and resists the wealthy and proud. Second, God does not test anyone; we are tested by our own inner desires. Third, God is a constant and generous giver of good gifts. Fourth, life demands choices. Fifth, the way of faith leads to good gifts from God, but one must ask in faith. These assumptions, according to James, provide believers with the proper perception needed to profess one's faith and act it out. James calls us to respond to the word of truth by walking the way of faith. Believers' first response should be listening because the word of truth can only save if it is truly received. Believers are to translate their faith into deeds, such as honest speech or caring for the dispossessed. They are to act out "the perfect law, the law of liberty," which is to "love your neighbor as yourself." The faithful who act will be blessed in their doing.

### **Reflection**

What basic assumptions, besides the ones listed in the "Commentary" section, does James make about God? Life? Faith? Does James' perception seem too simplistic or arbitrary to you? Do you tend to agree with his views? When in your life has "doing" your faith been especially hard? How did you respond to the challenge?

## **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

<sup>7:1</sup> Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly

wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup> and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' <sup>8</sup> You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." <sup>14</sup> Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

### **Commentary**

Jesus' opponents (Pharisees from Galilee and scribes from Jerusalem) questioned why he and His disciples were not living according to the "tradition of the elders." The "tradition" was an oral interpretation of Israel's ancestral customs. Jesus first responded to his opponents by quoting the (more authoritative) Prophets and the law, and then responded about their questions concerning purification to the crowd (resuming His role as teacher). Jesus' new teaching about inner purity calls us to reexamine our tendency to engage in long-held traditions and rituals rather than the transformation of our hearts. It also challenges our tendency to hold on to human traditions as if they were divinely commanded. Finally, it calls us to reexamine the exclusive stance of our faith communities. This challenge may be the hardest of all, if our faith is predicated on an "us-versus-them" understanding.

### **Reflection**

How did Jesus' teaching about inner purity challenge people in His and Mark's times? How does Jesus' teaching challenge us today as individuals, as a local church, and as a denomination? What transformation of the heart might you need to engage in right now?

### **Responsive Psalter**

### **Psalms 45:1-2, 6-9**

<sup>1</sup> My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.

<sup>2</sup> **You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever.**

<sup>6</sup> Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;

**<sup>7</sup> you love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;**

**<sup>8</sup> your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;**

**<sup>9</sup> daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.**

### **Closing Prayer**

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**