



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 12 - Proper 17 (C)
September 1, 2019

RCL: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Jeremiah 2:4-13

In the second chapter of Jeremiah, God is laying out a case against the people of Jerusalem for straying and turning to other gods. What stands out to me in this passage, however, is how God is upset with them for failing to lament: “They did not say, ‘Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt?’” And a few verses later, the prophet relays, “The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’” In other words, the people stopped asking where God was, and the priests stopped reminding them to do so (see Rodney R. Hutton’s footnote for Jeremiah 2:6-8 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford University Press, 2010).

God is calling attention to the fact that the people have ceased to complain to God! I love what this says about the importance of lament: it is an integral part of an intimate relationship with God. God not only expects but even desires that we voice our anguish when we feel God is absent. The cry in and of itself is an act of faith—it is a reaching out for God. At times we may feel guilty for wondering where God is and wanting to cry out, but in fact, this very cry embodies a faithfulness to the relationship.

- Does lament have a place in your prayer life?
- What cries of your heart might God be desiring you to voice?

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

With the psalm, we move from lament to singing with joy. The psalmist recounts what God has done for God’s people, bringing them out of slavery and feeding them abundantly in the desolate wilderness. The response one might expect to such loving care is a song of joy, and yet instead the people “follow their own devices,” forgetting how present God has been.

The last verse of this selection is particularly poignant: “But Israel would I feed with the finest wheat and satisfy him with honey from the rock.” This tenderness calls to mind God’s care for the house of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:11-13: “As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him... He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock.”

In both of these passages, one can hear God’s readiness to nurture and care for Israel as a mother cares tenderly for her children, but in their distraction the people miss this loving hand extended to them.

- What “devices and desires of our own hearts” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 41) do you see causing us to overlook or stray from the loving care God offers us?

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

In the final two chapters of Hebrews, the author gives clear-cut directions for how to walk in the way of Christ. If one thinks of Hebrews as an exhortation or sermon, this is the practical “how-to” section to wrap it up: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers... Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

In sum, these words are a reminder that together we make up the Body of Christ— and that consequently, whatever happens to one of us individually happens to all of us collectively. The challenge is to shape our lives with this awareness in mind—to actively live as though we know this to be true. Growing further into the awareness that our well being is tied up with others’ is a pattern of living we can practice, little by little.

- What is one shift you can make towards embodying the awareness that our well being is tied up with one another’s?

Luke 14:1, 7-14

In this passage, Jesus is eating dinner at the home of a religious leader. The text notes that those present were “watching him closely,” but Jesus is observing them carefully as well. Luke says that when Jesus noticed how the guests were choosing places of honor, he was moved to speak in a parable. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ parables serve to shift his hearers’ thinking by ending in unexpected ways and helping his audience to see in a new light.

We can gather from this scene that one’s place at the table is important, as are honor and status. It also seems that then, like today, it was tempting to think one could only achieve honor and status by moving to the head of the table and asserting one’s place. What Jesus encourages, however, is to flip the norm and sit at the other end of the table. While this goes against the expected, it is a powerful action. After all, when a person of status takes a lower seat at the table, they are opening up seats for those who would never dare take a higher seat. They are indicating through their actions, without speaking a word, that they value those who might be considered “lower”. Jesus is helping them to see that the true honor is in lifting up others and that those who draw all the eyes in the room have a unique opportunity to elevate those who go unnoticed.

- Where might you use your status to make room for and lift up another?

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Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

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