

Sermon “Beyond the Honeymoon”
Kirk of St James
Sunday September 1, 2024
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Having a plan and being organized can be an incredibly rewarding feeling. It can also give us a sense of control--that if things happen as expected we are prepared and ready for it. For example, we might plan to host a meal for family or, friends. We set a menu, do the grocery shopping, and make sure we have enough chairs around the table. If we are going on vacation we will likely research and prepare for our travels. What routes or flights we might need, where we will stay, and if we have the right supplies. If we decide to try something new we might look up how to do it, sign up for a class, or break it down into to steps to help us achieve our goals. Plans and meeting expectations can be a great thing!

However, life rarely fully co-operates with our hopes and plans. An entrée can accidentally get burned, or a dog can steal a pie. Cars can break down, planes be delayed, or luggage lost. We might envision how much learning a new skill like running will have us feeling happy and healthy only to want to never do it again after our first try. The reality is even with plans and dreams, we can find ourselves facing the unexpected.

I always pictured parenting as rocking my children to sleep, teaching them to do new things, and encouraging them. I did not picture chasing my shoeless toddler around the daycare parking lot before eight in the morning because they “wanted to feel cold” nor, how embarrassing it would be when the daycare reviewed their security footage for the day and saw me huffing around behind them because Theo is incredibly fast and motivated “when he wants to feel cold.” I did not anticipate tucking them in and telling them “I love you” for them to look up at me and instead of saying it back ask, “do you remember that time you forgot to pack our clothes for water day at school?” First, that was weeks ago, and second—it was one time.

Expectations and reactions are never what we think! It is a theme similar to this that follows through the scripture readings today. I seldom if ever try to preach on more than one passage because it is often too expansive. This week is a little different. Just as our life experiences can catch us off guard, the same can be true of discipleship and our faith lives. I believe this challenge can also be part of the struggle of being a Christian in the world today. On the surface Christianity can feel idealistic—love your neighbours, love others, forgive, God loves you, good stuff. However, life is more gritty than that and our faith can be a whole lot more challenging. A lot of things we are told to do are actually incredibly hard. Faith can seem impossible when we feel hopeless, forgiveness can feel totally out of reach when we have been hurt. Faith would be great if it was all miracles, healings, and positive feelings, but Jesus also wrestled with Pharisees, betrayal and pain.

Looking at our scripture readings today we begin with the Song of Solomon. The interpretations of this passage are varied amongst scholars. Some read it as being between two people in love, and some see it as an allegory for God's love for humanity. Either way it is full of hope, and joy, a celebration of love for love's sake. The world is in bloom, everything is perfect, and things feel easy. It is similar to a honeymoon period, everything is new, there is no fighting, and you haven't found your first empty and unreplaced toilet paper roll yet. It would be great if our Christian lives could live in this perfect mountain top state. That difficulties could be met with miracles, the closest parking space is always empty, and faith is never challenging. However we know all too well that discipleship, and faith is not like that. However, what the Song of Solomon does do is remind us of the joy, the wonder, and the celebration of love. Even though this might not be our constant daily reality, it is still important to remember—we are loved unconditionally by God and that is Good News.

Then we turn to James and we find a type of love and discipleship where the honeymoon phase is over. It is where we take the love we learned about in the Song of Solomon and put it to work in the world—it is one thing to hear about love, and another thing to live it out practically. James is keenly aware of the power of human speech to either encourage people or tear them down. “James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday living. He noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. He knew that such small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the scaffold on which we build community and the social order. Why was he concerned with words? Because they can make a huge difference in the way we relate to one another.”

While that is indeed true James then took it a step further—our actions should match our words. This is where the gospel of Mark comes in. The Pharisees were really good at talking—they knew their scriptures, they knew the rules, and they followed them perfectly. Because they did things so perfectly, they felt superior, and they felt secure in their beliefs. However, their words never touched their lives. They talked about love and forgiveness, yet those words never permeated their hearts. There is a print that hangs at Iona Abbey that conveys this truth succinctly. I have a copy of it here, a preacher standing in a pulpit talking, surrounded by a cloud of “words.” His hand is on an open bible, it is clear he has a lot to say, but in reality it is of no value if that is where things stop.

Somewhere between the joyful light hearted Song of Solomon, and the rigidity of the Pharisee’s and their laws sits the genuine message of James, reminding us to be doers of the word and not just hearers. Faith and discipleship can be joyful, it can be tough, and it should also be genuine, and that is the reality of where we live. How do we take that cloud of words and turn it into something more? As we prepare for the summer to slowly draw to a close, and the work

and potential of the year ahead to unfold this is an important question for us to wrestle with as a congregation. How does what we talk about here shape who we are as disciples of Christ? How do we move past hearing to doing? How do we find the joy, and not end up stuck in a rigid structure that does not allow us to experience the creativity of God? The question of how we live as disciples involves how we live out in the world and how we as a community work to engage those around us. James reminds us of not only the importance but also of what is genuine and of lasting value. Together we wrestle, seek, knock, ask, persevere, and work together to help shape the world a little more into what God created it be, when we love our neighbour as ourself.