

Sermon
September 1st, 2024
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; PSALM 45:1-2, 7-10; JAMES 1:17-27; MARK
7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I wonder how many of you know the Cole Porter song “Don’t Fence Me In”? It’s all about being free under the starry skies, the longing to be “turned loose”, and in it is the line “...I can’t stand fences”. I have never really identified with this song. You see, I love fences. I’m certainly not talking about barbed wire fences, or even white picket fences. The fences I’m fascinated with, the ones that fill me with inspiration, are old farm fences. Wooden fences, sometimes a hundred or more years old that wind and wend their way over rolling fields. The kind of fences that have a post in an “X”, then two, three or even four beams running between the posts. These fences are a marking of boundaries. A reminder of thresholds. There is a gentle containment by these posts and beams.

Our readings this morning join concern for the inner life with care for external behaviors. They are about celebrating inner and outer beauty. They are a reminder that we are to be attentive to both our inner and our outer lives in our humanity.

We heard the famous passage from the Song of Solomon – the only time we hear from this book in our three-year lectionary. This reading celebrates romance and beauty and embodiment. Jesus – the Word, God’s love – became flesh and dwelt among us, and we are love, embodied. We are made

for loving relationship, with God and with each other, and with the whole created world. Our bodies and our words are how we enact and speak God's love in the world.

We're embarking on a five-week journey through the Letter of James today. James was a practical theologian: he joins our inner and outer lives. He celebrates God's amazing grace and invites us to do the same but reminds us then to let our lives speak! He reminds us to embody our faith. He reminds us to cultivate our inner lives – to cultivate love in our hearts – and to let that come alive in our actions.

And, our Gospel passage today. We're back in the Gospel of Mark today, after a five-week journey through John's Gospel. We have to be careful with this text. There have been too many anti-Jewish interpretations of it. Jesus is speaking as a Jew. He is not condemning purity practices per se – he is warning against hiding behind them. He is warning against judgement and hypocrisy. He is warning against a disconnect between the inner workings of our hearts and minds and our outer actions. Ritual has tremendous potential to help, but it can also mask and hide and allow that which is harmful to fester in our hearts and minds.

In the ancient world, many understood the heart to be the center of a person's identity and the source of a person's will as a decision maker and a "doer". It was the link between inner reflection and outer action. Jesus speaking

about what comes from within is a reminder that we are both cells and souls, and we need to be attentive to both!

We *are* in our humanity, both cells and souls. We are spirit, embodied. What is in our hearts and souls and minds can be made manifest in ways that help and heal, or that harm if we are not careful.

Back to that Cole Porter song and those fences! As we search for living word in our Scripture this morning, we might find ourselves daunted at the prospect joining our inner and outer worlds. Acknowledging that there is the potential for us to enact – embody – what goes on in our hearts and minds harmful ways is a heavy weight to bear. We are not alone in this joining of inner and outer worlds, though! We are not turned loose under the starry skies as the Cole Porter song says. God is with us under those starry skies!

God has given us a lot of room to move through this life, but we are held as we move. We are surrounded by God's love. Those fences I talked about earlier remind me of this!

I see our Anglican tradition, prayer life, liturgy and the sacraments as this kind of a fence. For me, the Eucharist is a fence post; a marker from week to week. The beams between each fence post are Morning and Evening Prayer, reading of Scripture, prayer meditation and reflection, and I travel with these beams around me week to week, from fence post to fence post. And, of course, in between the beams are all kinds of things: life experiences, family, friends, fun.

Those posts and beams, this kind of a fence, is a boundary, a marker. It's not really going to keep anyone, or anything "out"; and I can step over it or through it whenever I want. These kind of markers or boundaries are a good thing; we need them in our humanity. Having beams and fence posts in our lives doesn't have to inhibit us. Those posts and beams support us, guide us, as we join our inner and outer lives.

Ritual, and symbol have tremendous potential, and for me, provide wonderful shape and guidance as we join our inner and outer lives. Where our own words, and even the words of those around us might fail to resonate, our rituals, our structured prayer, liturgy, and the Sacraments surround us, and create a space for resonance. They create a space where the "whispering of the Spirit" is amplified, echoing around us. I've said before that one of my favourite definitions of church is a "concentrating of the Spirit". It's not that the Spirit is any more present in our church buildings than in all of creation, but our gathering, our joining together in song and prayer and in listening, engaging with ritual and symbol, can help us to hear and feel the Spirit. In these things we are reminded that we are loved – and we are love – God invites us to embody that love in our actions.

What happens when we allow ritual and tradition to turn into a wall instead of a fence though? Jesus shows us in today's Gospel passage that we cannot hide behind a wall of rituals. Nothing outside, no ritual, can hide what goes on in our inner lives. We need to cultivate and tend to our lives from the

inside out. If we allow that which is harmful – pride, envy, harsh judgement just to name a few – guide our actions, this is true defilement.

I have a friend who is searching. She is someone who describes herself as “spiritual but not religious”. She is not a churchgoer; she has not read Scripture. She has fully embraced the idea the inner workings of her heart and mind can be enacted – embodied – in harmful ways though. She has created a fence such as the one I described above, using yoga, therapy, and reading various “spiritual” and self-help books, hoping that these things will support and guide her in life, hoping this is the cultivating her heart and mind and soul need. These are all good things, but I am sharing this with you, because she is crushed by the weight of joining her inner and outer lives. She'd be the first person to tell you that she feels alone behind her fence. We are not alone, though. This is God's great gift to us. Our fences are there, erected at our Baptism, and right next to us is Jesus. I invite you to close your eyes. Imagine the fence of this Anglican tradition – scripture, Sacraments, liturgy, prayer – gently surrounding you. Gently marking boundaries, guiding and supporting you as you let your cells and soul speak and embody love. Feel God loving you – all of you: heart, mind, soul and body.

I invite you to take this image of fences – posts and beams – with you. As you make your way through the week, remember that God is with you, and that as followers of Jesus we have the posts and beams we need to guide us in this

life. Remember that God is loving you from the inside out and inviting you to make that love known from the inside out, in Jesus name. Amen.