Worship Resources for Sunday, September 9th—Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 or Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 125 or Psalm 146; Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-17

In the Revised Common Lectionary there is a theme of social justice in the pairings of the Gospel of Mark and the Letter of James; this theme carries over into the Wisdom literature thread of the Old Testament. These passages from Proverbs 22 speak directly to God’s concern for the poor and how we are called to stand up against injustice. God does not favor one group over another—the Lord is maker of them all (22:2) but God’s concern is for the poor and their well-being, and this ought to be the concern of all people.

Isaiah 35:4-7a are words of hope from the prophet for those who have been in exile. We read these words today remembering God’s faithfulness in times of hardship, knowing that in our own times of struggle it is difficult to keep the faith, to take heart and lift up our heads. It always seems that the world is becoming worse and it is hard to see God’s goodness and the goodness of God’s creation in the midst of the violence, the vitriol rhetoric and the political division we are experiencing now. We must remember that God is faithful, God was faithful to the Israelites in exile and God is faithful to us, in that something new, something good, will come, and we must take heart and be ready for it.

Psalm 125 echoes this theme of God’s faithfulness, and that those who follow in the ways of God will experience this faithfulness. “Doing good” is not just abiding in the commandments, but actually living God’s ways into doing good for our neighbors and creation—it is about holistically living out God’s way in our lives.

Psalm 146 is a song of praise for God who hears the cries of the poor and makes justice possible for the oppressed. God works through those who do good, who live in God’s ways, and therefore God works in those who work towards ending oppression and injustice.

Mark 7:24-37 contains two familiar stories of healing by Jesus, both by acts of faith and courage of others. The first is the familiar story of the Syrophoneician Woman, who happens to come to Jesus at a bad time. Jesus has gone to a house in the region of Tyre and doesn’t want anyone to know he is there—probably to rest, to take a break—and this woman gets his attention and bows down to his feet, begging him to cure her daughter, to cast out the demon that has possessed her. When Jesus first turns her away—in an act and with words that are ungodly—she reminds him “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She may be worthless in society, but she was worthy to God, and Jesus is reminded of that. By asserting her own worth, by standing up (to Jesus!) in faith, her daughter is made well.

In the second story, it is the friends of a deaf man who bring him to Jesus, who beg Jesus to lay his hands on this man who also has problems speaking. Jesus says the words, “Be opened.” Was it to open the ears and mouth of the deaf man, or was it to open the eyes, ears and hearts of the people witnessing this event? In either case, it is the faith of the man’s friends, the ones who bring him to Jesus and beg for Jesus to lay his hands on him that moves Jesus into this act of opening.

James 2:1-17 is a reminder that we are called to help the poor and the widow and the orphan—those in need—and that this basic call is the fulfillment of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Faith without works is dead. It does not matter what we say in the long run if we do not live out what we have been taught. As Jesus said, all of the commandments can be summed up in loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. If we do not care for those in need, we do not love God. Plain and simple. Yet it is much harder to live out. We often put ourselves first. We want to look good in front of others. Sometimes we even do charitable acts to look good, but we are not consistent with them. If we are truly faithful, then we are moved out of compassion and faith, not out of an attempt to do good works to earn social points—or even a foothold in heaven. We do good works because this is who we are, what we were called to be in Christ Jesus: a people who love other people.

There is a saying, “God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet.” In the scriptures today, there is a theme of doing good—speaking out for the poor, standing up against injustice—in all of these things, we act out of faith, and we know that God is working through us. We can do nothing apart from God, and we know that God is present in us individually and collectively when we love others. And we cannot love others if we do not care for their needs, if we do not seek to end their oppression and stop injustice against them. We must live out the calling of God and allow God to work through us, and not be in it for our own gain.

Call to Worship:

Leader: We hear the cries for help after the storms,

People: We are God’s hands of help.

Leader: We read the pleas of the poor and homeless on their cardboard signs,

People: We are God’s hands of hope.

Leader: We see the plight of Syria’s children, and others in war-torn countries around the world,

People: We are God’s hands of compassion.

Leader: We touch the hands of the sick and the dying, in hospital and hospice beds,

People: We are God’s hands of love.

All: Come, let us be God’s hands in this world in need of healing and hope, compassion and mercy, justice and faith. Come, let us worship Christ, who works through us.

Prayer of Confession:

Creator God, Christ and Spirit, we come to You, knowing in Your wholeness there is nothing that can set us apart. We confess our sins, our greed and our desire that puts ourselves first, and we ask not only for forgiveness, but for help in living out Your ways. Call us away from the desire of the world, to model our desire after You. Help us to hear our brothers and sisters in need, to extend our hands as Your hands, to bring hope and healing. Guide our feet into the ways of peace, that we might stand up against injustice in nonviolent ways. Keep our hearts close to You, Loving God, and remind us that we are Yours. In the name of the Triune God, may our relationships become whole as Yours. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon:

We are one in Christ Jesus. There is nothing that can separate us from God’s love, and when we come together, even in our brokenness, even in our sinfulness, we can feel the power of God’s love and mercy and we know that in Christ we are a new creation. We can stand up for justice. We can walk in the ways of peace. We can reach out and help to end poverty and homelessness. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Go and share the Good News. Amen.

Prayer:

Amazing and wondrous God, in the past we may have been afraid of You. We may have sought to please You. We may have even run away from You. We are astounded, day by day, of Your love that surpasses all understanding and wisdom. You created us out of love, and You love us despite our shortcomings. Create in us a new heart, O God, to love others. Fill our hearts with compassion for the needs of our world, that we might live out Your ways of peace, justice and mercy, in the best way we are able to care for those in need. When we fall, gently guide us back onto our feet, that we may continue to walk in Your ways. Loving God, hear our prayer. Amen.