

The Song of Cicadas and Sparrows



Sermons Based on the Gospel
Lessons for the Season of
Pentecost, Second Half



Stephen C. Bond

The Song Of Cicadas And Sparrows

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Cycle B Sermons for the
Second Half of Pentecost

Stephen Bond

CSS Publishing Company
Lima, Ohio

THE SONG OF CICADAS AND SPARROWS

FIRST EDITION

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Go team Jesus.

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Foreword

Jesus keeps surprising me.

He does.

Not just in the obscure verses or random passages of the gospel I haven't read in a while.

Not just in the lesser-known stories that didn't make the cut for Sunday school flannel-board lessons in childhood.

And not just in the "hard sayings" that make a preacher want to look at the other appointed readings in the Sunday lectionary before starting to craft the next week's sermon. I mean all the time — including from the passages and stories I have heard over and over again throughout my life, from growing up as a kid in the church, staring up at the symbols in the stained-glass windows to serving in ministry for the past twenty years.

Jesus keeps surprising me.

Just when I think I know what Jesus has to teach me on a subject, or worse yet, just when I think I have got the rabbi from Nazareth cornered and that I have at last mastered all he has to say, the living Jesus slips through my grip and points me in a new direction, usually taking me to people I had not planned on meeting, questions I dared not ask, or places outside my comfort zones.

And yet, I would not have it otherwise. I hope in these pages you'll find the same surprising Jesus, even if we thought we already knew all he had to tell us or had figured out every last mystery from Mark's gospel. Even in stories you may have heard all your life or preached on for decades, the risen Christ keeps flipping the script with us, shaking off our expectations like shackles, and leading us more fully into life.

So, I hope that you discover here one more voice to share a conversation with as we walk this road with Jesus, and that you might find yourself drawn more deeply in love with this one who reigns from a cross, who chooses the overlooked, and

who — as the old hymn puts it — has “love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.” I pray that at the very least, you might find in these words some echo of the cadence of the gospel’s own strange but beautiful song — the one whose notes sometimes feel dissonant to the noise that is all around us, but whose melody is also somehow shared with every voice in all creation, from the cherubim and seraphim to the songbirds and winged things outside your kitchen window.

I hope you meet Jesus again in these pages... and that he surprises you, too.

Proper 17
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Dressing Up For The Doctor

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

So, I have some good news, and some bad news.

Actually, to be honest, I have some bad news... and then some worse news. And only then, once we've faced the worst of it, there will be good news for us.

I have to admit right now that I feel like the world's worst salesman, or like the reason nobody wants to go to the doctor for their yearly check-up. Nobody wants a one-two punch of bad news, and nobody *really* wants to know that bad news is what they're in for. But here we are.

And because we are here together, people of God indwelt by the Spirit of God, we can be brave enough to face the bad news when it comes from an honest source like Jesus, so that we can dare to believe the good news that comes from him as well. And I promise, there will indeed be good news today for us. We just have to get there.

First, after much heel-dragging, the bad news: you can't fool an x-ray.

You simply can't. That is to say, even if you put on your finest three-piece suit or an elegant evening gown to dress up your appearance for a doctor's appointment, when you go for an x-ray, the technicians who read it will be able to see the broken bone or the spot of cancer that doesn't show up on the outside. The x-rays are not fooled by your outer appearance in the waiting room, no matter how much effort you put into making yourself look all put together on the outside. Whether you go to the doctor's office for an x-ray, or to the hospital for a CAT scan, they'll be able to see inside of you, no matter how sparkly your jewelry is to the eye or how neatly pressed and dry-cleaned your outfit is as you greet the receptionist. You can't fool an x-ray.

In so many words, that's what Jesus brings us face-to-face within his confrontation with the respectable religious leaders in this scene from Mark's gospel. He compels us to admit that no amount of playing dress-up on the outside of ourselves will address the problems and broken places on the inside of us. Any time we use our shows of piety or public displays of devotion to present ourselves as pure and good and holy, it's as fu-

tile as dressing up in a tux or a ballgown before getting an x-ray. And, while there's nothing wrong or sinful about dressing up to go to the doctor's office, we had better be honest enough with ourselves that it won't make a difference when it comes to a diagnosis. It's all just a matter of polishing up the outside in the hope of ignoring what's gone wrong on the inside.

Of course, in first-century Galilee, nobody was getting an x-ray or wearing Armani and Gucci to their physical. But they were wrestling with the question of how much of their identity as God's people comes from the public performance of piety. When the respectable religious teachers, here including a group from the Pharisees and the Bible expert scribes, confronted Jesus about the way he didn't measure up to their expectations, he diagnosed them with a case of missing the point.

The whole confrontation began as some of these self-appointed guardians of public piety noticed that Rabbi Jesus apparently didn't require his students to keep up with the ritual acts of washing that other teachers and traditions within Judaism practiced. Mark, our storyteller, noted that among some in first-century Judaism, it was customary to ritually wash your hands, along with your produce from the grocery store and your pots and pans too. And to be fair, the Pharisees saw this as an extension of the Torah's commands to ancient Israel's priests, who ritually washed both their bodies and the objects used in worship and sacrifice to God. At their best, the Pharisees envisioned everyone in the people of God embodying that same kind of holiness and priestly vocation, so they taught their students that everyone should keep these ritual practices. It was meant to be an outer habit that reflected an inner discipline to be set apart and holy to God in every area of life.

To be further clear, Jesus wasn't anti-hand-washing. Jesus didn't think it was sinful or wicked to do the dishes, rinse your radishes, or clean your carrots. And for us, living twenty centuries later and in living memory of a pandemic, we all know the value and importance of good basic hygiene from hand-washing to rinsing off an apple before you eat it. Jesus wasn't

here to scold us for scrubbing with soap and water. So please, let's be clear: no one is telling you *not* to wash your hands or your dishes as an act of faith.

But what *did* concern Jesus was how easily the people of his day and our time alike use those outward gestures as a mere cover, so that we can avoid dealing with the more difficult troubles inside us, in our deepest selves. He responded to his accusers by telling them that they seem much more interested in traditions about the outside appearance of things than they are with their character. "You all are great at paying lip service to God," he basically tells them, "But you've ignored the orientation of your hearts." And that's like trying to avoid the scan of an x-ray by dressing up in your fanciest clothes for the doctor. It just doesn't work.

Like the prophets of ancient Israel before him, Jesus insisted that God had always been interested in the kind of people we are, over the ways we present ourselves to the world on the outside. Prophets like Micah told the people that God wasn't interested in lavish sacrifices of bulls or goats or olive oil but had always been clear in the call for God's people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Amos told them that God wasn't going to listen to their songs or prayers if they were going to shrug off the needs of the poor in their neighborhoods or ignore when people were cheated in the marketplace. And the book of Isaiah reminded them that God was never impressed with ritual fasting or performances of repentance but instead wanted them to welcome the homeless to their door and the hungry to their table, and to fight against every kind of injustice that harmed their neighbors. In other words, Jesus wasn't attacking Israel's ancient faith when he called out the Pharisees and the scribes; he was tapping into the core of that faith by reminding them that God has always been more interested in dealing with the crookedness in our hearts than with the crookedness of our neckties. He wasn't saying that it's wrong to wash your hands or to scrub your skillet, only to

say that neither is a substitute for addressing the brokenness inside of us.

Of course, in our day, we've invented a hundred new ways of obsessing over our outward appearance. If Jesus thought it seemed unnecessarily showy to make a fuss about washing your veggies as a sign of your piety, imagine how he would react to our countless ways of putting on a religious show today. In the age of social media, it can feel like every meme we share, every comment we post, and every selfie we take is all about cultivating our personal brand and projecting a perfect, polished version of ourselves in order to win other people's approval—or maybe, we think, even God's. We make sure folks can see the cross necklace in our profile picture; we put the bumper sticker or Jesus fish symbols on our cars, we make sure to include hashtags like “#blessed” or “#GodIsGood” in the hopes that we'll communicate to the world just how seriously we take our faith. It's easy to turn our faith into a performance, even with good intentions of trying to be unashamed of Jesus or bold witnesses for the Gospel. And as long as we have those external appearances to point to, we think it lets us off the hook when it comes to the inside stuff we don't want to deal with.

That's why we need to hear the bad news from Jesus: none of us can cover over the rottenness we usually call “sin” by just putting on a good performance on the outside. You can't fool an x-ray, and you sure as heaven can't fool God. So, when Jesus' disciples press him on the subject he tells them: “It's not what goes into a person that defiles you, it's what comes out of you.” And then he elaborates: it's not the outside appearance, the holy-looking habits, or the practices of piety that matter in the end. It's what pours forth from our hearts. It is, to borrow Dr. King's famous phrase, “the content of our character.” No amount of rinsing your salad greens will address the cancer of sin in our hearts, the same way that no amount of fashion sense will change the results of your next x-ray.

And that, unfortunately, brings from the bad news... to the *worse* news. And the worse news from Jesus is that he sees inside us to the core of our beings... and he knows that there is

rottenness there. It's not what goes into a person that defiles you, Jesus says, and at first that sounds like a relief. But he keeps going: "It's what comes from within a person that defiles us, and there's a lot of rotten stuff that human beings conceal in their hearts." His laundry list is hardly flattering — we use people and cheat on them; we steal from each other and lie to each other. We puff ourselves up with pride, we make ourselves sick with jealousy, and we kill each other or allow people to die by our indifference, all because something crooked in our hearts tells us it's ok. Jesus diagnoses the real problem with us, and it's not a matter of how we're dressed or whether we have washed our hands enough. It's that somehow these hearts of ours are bent inward in self-interest and sin. Our older brother in the faith Martin Luther used to say in Latin that we were *incurvatus in se*—curved in ourselves, like an ingrown toenail of the soul. And when that happens to us—and it does happen to all of us—we act in self-centered, spiteful, mean-spirited, manipulative, and greedy ways. Jesus can see into our innermost selves like an x-ray, and that's where the real problem lies. That's why he is so frustrated with the respectable religious leaders here in Mark 7, because they should know better than to focus on the externals while the insides are all broken. And that's why he compels us to come to terms with the same truth, too. No matter what performances of piety we put on, no matter how many spiritual selfies we pose for, there's no fooling God, who knows that there is rottenness inside our hearts that we have been allowing to fester.

Now, having said all that, the good news on this day is all the more beautiful once we've heard the bad news... and the worse news. Because the thing is, Jesus, who can see even the filthiest stuff bubbling up from the crookedest parts of our hearts, sees us as we are... and he hasn't run away. He knows what we are like at our worst, even past all the layers of distraction and devotion we try and hide behind, and he isn't going anywhere. He sees us as we are, loves us as we are, and is also willing to make new creations out of us. In other words,

it's not that Jesus sees past the outer appearances and finds that we are all just perfect peaches deep down and accepts us because we are really all such remarkably righteous people on the inside after all. It's that Jesus sees past the smokescreens, can see us at our least lovely and least loving, and he loves us anyway — enough to be honest with us, to stick it out with us, and to renew these hearts of ours.

Like James Baldwin put it so well, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Jesus knew we want to avoid dealing with the brokenness inside us, and how much we would rather play dress-up or perform our religion on the outside, so we don't have to admit how much our lives are distorted by selfishness, warped by apathy, and entangled with sin. But Jesus loved us enough to bring us face to face with the truth about us, so that we can face it, and so that he can bring about a new creation in us. He didn't tell his disciples or the crowds or even the Pharisees and the scribes that they are so mired in sin that he's giving up on them. Rather, like any decent doctor, Jesus diagnoses the deep-down problem and then says, “Here's what we're going to do about it.”

Jesus never runs away from people because he's scared of what he's seen on the inside of them, and he never abandons people because they are deemed too sinful. Rather, it's precisely the people who have seen the x-rays for themselves and know their condition is severe who find hope when they are around Jesus. It's why the folks who most eagerly gathered at Jesus' table and listened to his teaching were the ones who had been branded as outcasts and sinners because they weren't trying to paper over their problems with performed piety. It's why Jesus would say things like, “The tax collectors and prostitutes are in line for the kingdom ahead of the so-called religious experts, because at least they aren't trying to pass off a religious show as a sign of righteousness.” It's the folks who are done pretending they are well who are finally ready to listen to their doctors;

until we get to that point, we are going to keep trying to fool ourselves somehow or other.

What Jesus makes possible for us is that we can finally be done with the games, finally done with religious dress-up, and finally quit ignoring the sickness called sin that curves us in on ourselves, and let Jesus heal us. That is the point of having an x-ray to spot a broken bone or reveal a tumor, after all. We don't go through those tests just to feel bad about ourselves, but in order that a good physician can heal what is fractured or remove what is malignant. In other words, we need the difficult diagnosis of Jesus precisely because it is the beginning of how Jesus brings us back to life. And from beginning to end, Jesus promises to stick with us, never to bail out on us because of just how much sin we struggle with, and never to give up on us because of how many times and how many ways we have let it fester all over again.

If the bad news is that our external ways of going through the motions can't change the internal condition of our hearts, and the worse news is that Jesus can see our hearts are pretty well broken and sick with the malignancy we call sin, the good news is that Jesus loves us even as we are and gives us new hearts. That was the hope the prophets kept pointing back to in Israel's ancient past. When the people found themselves in deep trouble and confronted with their sin, the prophets didn't say, "Here's a new way to try covering over it — add a few extra hand-washings and God will be fooled; mutter this prayer and wear this logo and no one will notice or care about the malice you have toward your neighbors." Instead, God kept saying through the prophets, "I will make a new kind of relationship with you, my people, and I will give you new hearts instead of the old stony, shriveled ones. I'll write my ways of justice and mercy on your hearts, and you'll be done with needing to impress each other or think you were ever impressing me." Jesus brings that new covenant. Jesus fulfills what the prophets had been pointing us toward all along. And Jesus dares us to imagine how our lives will be free now if we aren't constantly

worrying about how our religiosity comes across to anybody else, and if we are done with thinking God needs us to put on a good show somehow. Jesus dares us to imagine what it might be like to let God reach all the way into those vulnerable places in our hearts, inside our deepest selves, and to heal us where we are broken there. Because we don't have to be ashamed or embarrassed about letting God see our hearts, not any more than we would for a physician to read our x-ray results and tell us what they'll do to heal a broken bone. That is the promise of our God: to see us as we are, unflinchingly, and to love us into wholeness. You don't have to dress up for the doctor, and you don't need to put on a show for God. You just don't.

After all the bad news and worse news has been aired and addressed, there remains the good news of Jesus: that in him, the God who has always seen us as we are loves us as we really are and also is making us whole where we had gotten used to brokenness. The God who sees us more honestly than an x-ray and loves us all the while is bringing these hearts of ours back to life.