

SERMON- Proper 17 (B)

Charles R. Cowherd

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalms 45: 1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

September 1, 2024

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

OPENING:

My sermon writing process was interrupted by two separate but related events this week.

The first event that overtook me was that, on Thursday, I got to go to one of my favorite places on earth. I got to go to Arlington National Cemetery and officiate and preach at Bill Spence's funeral and burial.

As I told Emma, Bill's widow, it was a gift and a blessing to do so, to be there with the family and the chaplains and staff at Fort Myer and Arlington Cemetery.

I have done *many* funerals and services over the years in that hallowed place, so I took, as a moment of personal privilege in my sermon, a moment to say that and also to relate that my own twin brother, Leonard, is buried at Arlington, in Section 60.

To make matters more special, Bill Spence, a parishioner here and a Vietnam Veteran and Army officer, Bronze and Silver Star recipient— Bill is an identical twin, he has an identical twin brother, named Bob Spence.

In ways that I cannot fully describe... to be at Arlington Cemetery burying someone else's twin brother was SO powerful for me.

I wanted to get the ritual right, I wanted to honor Bill, the way that my own twin brother was honored twenty years ago.

Luckily, they know what they are doing at Arlington Cemetery:

the rows of white headstones, the Old Guard, the folded flag, the playing of Taps, the riderless horse, Amazing Grace on the bagpipes. It simply does not get much better than that, my family experienced it in 2004 when my brother died, so many of yours have experienced the same, and the Spence family did as well, I believe

PHARISEES

The ritual at Arlington Cemetery is so well done, it's so pronounced and perfect... It reminds me of Mark, Chapter 7, when Jesus says:

They do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles

In other words, I am comparing the Arlington National Cemetery experience with the practices of the Pharisees, which takes some gall because the Pharisees are Jesus' traditional opponents in the Gospels.

However, if you have been listening to my preaching, you might remember that I have soft spot for the Pharisees, and I have said that Pharisees are great because they show up, they care, they try hard... they would make great parishioners.

Pharisees are great because we are all Pharisees, we care about the wrong things sometimes, we try and we mess up. And we try again.

RITUALS:

But, I love Arlington National Cemetery.

I am amazed at the dignity and reverence and precision with which they perform their ritual acts. I was honored to be a part of it.

Thursday, they did such a great job,

the organist (who of course knew Todd) played beautifully,

the Chaplain (whose name was Timothy) cared deeply and helped so even I could not mess it up.

The soldiers, who are baby-faced teenagers, were flawless.

The cemetery reps', the civilians who have the uncomfortable task of telling you to leave, were so professional in their difficult duties.

However, I sometimes feel like it's a bit of "Hammer meet nail" situation... so much so that the grief process can get lost. I say that realizing I bring a lot into this by way of my own personal baggage.

Now, I don't think Jesus is saying in our passage: "ritual bad, not ritual good."

I could not stand before you in these robes, in this place, with this service if I thought that were true.

Like most things Jesus cares about, it's harder than that.

I think Jesus comes to clear the deck, to flatten our self-righteousness and navel-gazing. He is trying to wipe the slate clean, to shake up people's assumptions about the way things are done.

I think that's what he is trying to say—that, ultimately, it's about who we are as human beings, our fallen and broken nature, and the impossibility of curing, of saving ourselves, through ritual alone.

To recap: there is Good News: our outer observances don't matter. That's nice to hear.

The Bad News, though, is the dirt is already on the inside, it's in our hearts. That's tougher to hear.

We can't wash our hands out of that, we can't out liturgy someone else, we can't ritualize ourselves into safety, security, happiness, perfection.

SECTION 60:

Arlington National Cemetery was, of course, thrust into the conversation this week not just in our parish life but nationally.

I don't like usually to preach on current events and I definitely don't like to shoehorn them into whatever the Gospel happens to be.

But the controversy around the former president's staffer and the Arlington staff in Section 60—where the most recent war dead, including my brother, are buried—has everything to do with what Jesus is talking about in Mark 7.

Who is in? Who is out?

What is appropriate behavior and in what place?

Most importantly, what does it all mean? Why are holy spaces important? What is the purpose of ritual?

It was this double-whammy, of the Spence funeral and this political headline that caused me to go back to the drawing board for this sermon, and I do so with some reluctance. Not just for the time involved but for my assiduous desire “not to bring politics into the pulpit”—whatever that means.

A few observations:

1) The first comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. “There is nothing new under the sun.”¹ We have been here before. Section 60, Arlington Cemetery, an election year, this time it was 2016, the former president was a presidential candidate at the time and there was a controversy over the politicization of an Arlington National Cemetery grave site, that of Humayan Khan, a few stones from that of my brother. Do you remember that one? It was a *zillion* political controversies ago: the Khan family spoke at the rival political convention, our 45th president had some words about it.

Recriminations and op-eds followed.

I even wrote one—Charles Cowherd, a mere Seminarian at VTS, got it published in the *USA Today*, August 2016.

I reread what I wrote, pretty good—you can “google” it.²

I reread the comments section and people commenting on what I read, pretty bad.

2) Secondly, in my and my family’s grief, we have experienced a variety of rituals—political and sacred—where politicians “help you grieve.” People show up when your 22 year old brother is KIA in a contentious war, and that’s to their credit.

Twenty years ago, Eric Cantor, God Bless ‘em, was our Representative at the time covering Culpeper. I remember him, future House Majority Leader, rising star in the party at that moment. His driver happened to be a classmate of mine from VMI, so they drove to our house after my brother’s death and came into our living room and it was the most awkward 45 minutes known in the history of creation.

Us in our grief, him in his limited ability to provide solace.

Then there was the late Senator John McCain, Episcopalian, war hero—he was so small when we met him, physical, frail even from his injury and his age. But I remember he looked at us and said in our grief:

“Our faith tells us that our loved ones have gone to a better place, and our faith us tells us that we will see them there one day.”

I remember he hugged my sister-in-law, my brother’s widow and said “You are one brave lady.”

¹ Ecclesiastes 1.9

² [Voices: Honoring Humayun Khan's service \(usatoday.com\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/08/08/charles-cowherd-humayan-khan/9000000001/)

By that point, he was so big in the room

That sort of interaction, to be sure is, few and far between. My take-away from my family's brief moment in the political limelight is that one should not rely on politicians to work through my grief. Hear me: I believe in our democratic system, I believe in voting. I love Arlington, but I need a bigger Savior than them or that. In my case, I went to church, I went to Shrine Mont, religious ritual helped but...

CONCLUSION:

I have not figured this all out.

I am fairly certain that Jesus calls for respect for the Dead, and the living.

I am fairly certain that Jesus calls us to give great respect for the grief process.

I am not sure how he would sort out all our political institutions and the attention that we give to our war heroes.

I am certain that he would complicate the whole conversation, problematize our arguments, shake it up, cause our heads to spins. He would not mind offending. Just like he did with the Pharisees.

I have found, in my own experience, that Jesus is always willingness to walk with you and that he will supply people and a community along the way that can help and, paradoxically, there will be institutions, *and rituals, and cups, and pots and bronze kettles* to help along the way.

AMEN.