

## Proper 17 • Year B

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13 • Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10 • James 1:17-27 • Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

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We re-join the Gospel of Mark today after a five-week sojourn in the gospel of John. While on our detour in John we listened week-by-week as that evangelist provided an extended lesson on the bread of heaven. As we pick up the story in Mark's gospel, it appears that the immediate issue "at hand" is still food.

Some of the Pharisees have come to Jesus, complaining that his disciples do not wash their hands prior to eating. By not washing their hands, the disciples were not 'pure' according to the high standards to which the Pharisees called all good Jews.

In those days, as in ours, society, our families, and sometimes most especially our faith communities have certain expectations of behavior. Some are mere social norms – like men in the South not wearing a seersucker suit after Labor Day. Or a woman not wearing white shoes before Easter.

In the same way that society, our families, or our faith communities establish expectations of behavior, we also establish consequences – should one happen to behave inappropriately.

In fact, it seems that usually we are much more interested in someone behaving badly – because then we'll get to enjoy the consequences that follow.

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When I was living in Tunis, on the North African coast, in the mid 1990's, one of my responsibilities as the manager of my company's operations there, was to entertain. Every couple of months, I would come up with an occasion for a big party, and invite the other foreigners who also lived in Tunisia.

But the 'real reason' for the party, was so that I could invite the local, Tunisian, government officials and business people.

As I was preparing for that very first party, I asked for advice from several of the more experienced ex-pats in town. What kind of food should I prepare? Should I serve wine? What about the Muslim dietary restrictions?

That was the \$64,000 question. How to come up with a menu that would be interesting and satisfying for the ex-pats in the crowd, while at the same time, not doing anything to offend the local Muslim and Jewish business people who would attend.

It was actually very simple, I was told. You prepare anything that you like, and just put small place-cards at each serving dish. You print them in both English and French. That way people can know if you've prepared a dip with might contain crabmeat. Or something with both meat and cheese. Or – a sausage ball. And therein hangs the tale.

Buried somewhere in my box of recipes was a quick and easy recipe that called for Bisquick, and sausage that had been browned on the stovetop. Then rolled into little bite-size balls, and baked in the oven.<sup>1</sup> Those are quick – it's easy to make a lot of them – and I was told that using sausage would be a big hit with the ex-pat crowd. Just write out that little place-card, and everything would be fine.

So . . . the party begins, the guests arrive, everyone gets something to drink, and dive into the dining room table where I've laid out a feast of finger food. About 30 minutes into the party, up come Mohamed and his wife Talebah. Mohamed works for me, as a geophysicist on loan from the Tunisia government.

Their plates are overflowing with food, and they come up with great excitement to tell me how much they like *the little meatballs mixed with dough*.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” I said to Mohamed. “Those aren't meatballs – they're sausage! Maybe the little place-card that said *avce porc (with pork)* got misplaced.” I know it's against your religion to eat pork – and I'm so sorry!”

Well, he and Talebah just laughed and laughed. “It's all right, Blake” he said. “The place-cards were all facing the same way on the table, and we came around the wrong way. So we didn't know that these contained pork.”

All the while, he and Talebah are continuing to eat the sausage balls. They could tell by the look on my face that I was confused. Mohamed laughed again, and then dropped the punch line.

“Oh, Blake, you Christians are so funny – and so worried about all your rules and about sin. For us, if we didn't mean to sin – it's not a sin.”

“We didn't see the sign that said it was pork, so it's okay if we enjoy these. This time. Not next time – but it's okay this time. You Christians are so funny.”

The entire conversation with Mohamed took less than two minutes. I've been thinking about it for twelve years.

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We get so obsessed with our rules. Especially rules for people different than ourselves. It's especially fun, and even easier – because those of us with power in our society get to make up the rules and definitions as we go along.

We get so hung-up on issues of lifestyle.

It's a far more difficult thing to come to an understanding about the style of someone's life, rather than their lifestyle. Do you hear the difference – between someone's 'lifestyle' and the 'style of someone's life?'

But how could you possibly know about the style of someone's life. It's too difficult. So . . . we resort to what we believe are easier questions. Questions that have to do with rules. Questions of lifestyle.

Gay? Lesbian? Single mother? Mexican-sounding name? Can't speak English very well? Works as a maid, Or for a yard company?

Buys food at the grocery with food stamps? A black man, walking down the street in a neighborhood 'where he doesn't belong?' Conservative, in a liberal parish? Charismatic in a 'high church' parish? Prefer contemporary Christian music in a place with traditional music? Eats pork? When a good Muslim wouldn't? Doesn't wash their hands before they eat? When all good 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews did so?

Those are all easy, easy questions. With obvious correct answers – we know, because we made up the rules. And the all too obvious consequences to those whose behavior falls outside those rules.

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When Jesus replied to the Pharisees, I think he made it pretty clear.

It doesn't really matter if we honor God with our lips, but not in our hearts, Jesus said.

Jesus said - it doesn't really matter if we say we worship God, but we put forth our own doctrines and dogmas and say they are from God.

None of that matters, Jesus said, when we abandon the commandment of God and hold to human traditions.

*The commandment of God.* Right there it is. And we say it every Sunday, in the Rite I service of the Eucharist.

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*

I think that Jesus is telling us that he doesn't care so much about our lifestyle.

It's the style of our life that matters to God

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## **<sup>i</sup> Sausage Ball Recipe**

### **INGREDIENTS:**

- 3 C. Bisquick
- 2 C. Cheddar Cheese, grated
- 1 lbs. sausage, hot or mild

### **PREPARATION:**

Preheat oven to 350 degree; mix all ingredients together. Form into 1" balls. Bake for 15 minutes; drain on paper towels. Serve warm.