

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
November 5, 2020

“Middle Spaces”

Berkeley Divinity School
Morning Prayer
Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

When David Potter invited me to preach back in late August, my first reaction was one of delight. It’s always a blessing to be with the Berkeley community. I had a great time a year ago, visiting and speaking with the students and Dean McGowan in the Senior Colloquium.

My second reaction, though, was one of mild disappointment. When I looked at the liturgical calendar, I noticed that November 5th fell in the “middle space” between the feast day of Richard Hooker (on November 3rd) and the feast day of William Temple (on November 6th). Two of my favorite theologians – and yet I couldn’t preach on either!

What I didn’t realize over two months ago, was that November 5th would occupy another kind of middle space: the strange time between election night and the time when a winner was officially declared in the presidential race. As election day, November 3rd, drew closer, I thought that living in an electoral middle space might be an unsettling thing. But I had no idea how truly unsettling the last 36 hours have been.

Middle spaces are hard. As human beings, we love binaries: on/off, right/wrong, good/evil, winners/losers. We long for certainty and closure, especially when a lot is at stake. And so it’s really hard when we can’t have that.

And yet, ironically, many of us live primarily in middle spaces. Queerness is about living in the middle spaces between the binaries of male/female and gay/straight. Being Asian American is about living in the middle spaces between Asia and America, as well as black and white. Being a queer person of color is about living in the middle spaces between sexuality, gender, and race.

It’s fitting, therefore, that this morning’s first reading is from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, also known as Sirach or the Wisdom of Ben Sira. Ecclesiasticus – not to be confused with

Ecclesiastes – belongs to the Apocrypha, the odd collection of texts that is located in the middle space between the Old Testament and the New.

Written in both Hebrew and Greek, the Apocrypha occupies the linguistic middle space between those two languages. And, liturgically speaking, the Apocrypha is a middle-space text because, although it is not technically canonical, it is still authorized for worship.

This morning's reading from chapter 44 of the Book of Ecclesiasticus is a reminder that we can find wisdom and comfort even in the midst of middle spaces. This passage – the prelude to the famous "Hymn in Praise of the Ancestors" – initially sets up a binary of famous people vs. forgotten people.

On the one hand, the text's author, Ben Sira, invites us to sing the praises of famous people. "Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations."

The prelude lists twelve categories of famous people: rulers, counselors, prophets, teachers, composers, writers, and others. (Interestingly, priests are not mentioned in this list.) We are told that these people were "honored in their generations" and were the "pride of their times." They have "left behind a name" for themselves.

On the other hand, Ben Sira describes a class of forgotten people for whom there is "no memory." These people have "perished" as though "they had never existed" or had never been born.

But ultimately Ben Sira focuses on neither those who are famous, nor those who are forgotten. Instead, he focuses on those everyday, ordinary people whom God sees and remembers because of their piety and love. These people might not be famous, but neither are they forgotten. God will never forget the "righteous deeds" of these middle-space people, and their glory will never be "blotted out."

I find such a promise of God's faithfulness to be particularly comforting as 2020 – this *annus horribilis* – draws to a close. There has been so much death and loss all around us in the midst of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and white supremacy. We have become numb to the horrific death toll that shatters records day after day. So many people have died in seeming anonymity – not to mention in isolation and terror.

And yet the Book of Ecclesiasticus bears witness to God's promise that the holiness of the everyday and the ordinary will never be forgotten.

As much as I might prefer the certainty of an election that has been officially called – or the certainty of preaching about a declared “holy person” or “witness” such as Richard Hooker or William Temple – today’s reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus is an important reminder that God is in fact found in the middle spaces.

May we remember to embrace the middle spaces in our lives – as difficult as that might be.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.