

A Vision for Youth Ministry
Song of Solomon 2: 8-13, James 1: 17-27
13th Sunday after Pentecost/B, August 30, 2009
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I was thrilled to see the scripture lessons for today. They were not chosen specifically to shape our conversation on discipleship education. They are the lectionary lessons for this Sunday. The passage from Song of Solomon only appears once every three years. Some of you may be thankful for its infrequency. Many of us have heard it read at a wedding because it appears as though the writer is reflecting on a deep, abiding, passionate, sustaining love between two lovers. This is true; however it is not only human love that he describes, but also divine love, the way that God loves God's beloved ones.

You may think it odd to have it included in the Bible, let alone selected as a passage for the lectionary cycle. Many people are not comfortable talking about such things as love and passion and commitment and fidelity in church. I find this aversion odd. South Church is a place where we can talk about anything and this faithful commitment includes the ministry we do with and among our youth. We trust that in a loving, caring, compassionate community we can talk about such things with each other. Depending on the level of maturity, there may be more or less giggling around certain topics, but that does not mean we shy away from the conversation. The love we receive from God and that we share with each other allows us to create the kind of safe, nurturing community where any topic is fair game. We want our kids to ask questions, to receive frank and honest responses and to collectively discern what God might say about the issue. We want them to feel loved and honored and respected, not only from the adults with whom they interact, but from their peers. This is our passion and our vision for youth ministry.

James implores us to be not only hearers of the word, but doers of the word. Faith that is not active is no faith at all. We do not ask our youth to acquire a lot of information about God before they feel comfortable putting their faith into action. We share with them our own faith experiences and then invite them into a relationship of service together. There are many opportunities where youth can be in mission and ministry with and among adults. They learn that there are people here who care deeply for them. When our youth reach the year of confirmation, sophomore year in high school, we do not hand them a stale curriculum that was devised by a group of adults many years ago. Certainly there are experiences that are repeated year to year. However, our young people fashion together a community experience that is driven and shaped by their questions. It is molded around their unique gifts and the contributions they bring to the process. It is never exactly the same from year to year. In this way, we honor our youth. Our youth are doers in the word. This is our passion and our vision for youth ministry.

It does not take long to figure out that South Church has a passion for youth ministry. We love our youth and we strive to create the kind of community where that love can be fostered and shared among them. There are so many places in the world where the gifts and wisdom youth are under valued or dismissed. They aren't old enough to do thus and so. They are not mature enough to do thus and so. We don't think that way here. We

invite our young people to put their faith into action every chance they get. We invite our youth to get involved, to share their gifts, to reflect theologically and prayerfully on mission work. We love it when they invite their friends to come and think what they do at their church is “cool.” Faith is more than what we learn, it is a way of life, it is reflected in the way we live. This is just as true for our youth as it is for anyone else in this community. This is our passion and our vision for youth ministry.

I see our youth ministry as a ministry of first fruits. Biblically, the first fruits that were harvested were a promise of what was yet to come. They were a reminder of our partnership with God, the giver and source of all good things. As recipients of such generosity, we naturally yearn to return to God a portion of those gifts. Everyone who is involved with our youth understands this sense of gratitude and passion to share. We get tremendous joy from working with our middle school youth and seeing the things they can accomplish. However, that is just a glimpse of what they might experience as they grow in faith and maturity. It has been our high school youth, especially the older youth, who have stepped forward in times of crisis to demonstrate the gifts for ministry that they possess. They are not afraid to live their faith, to share their faith, to share the love and respect they have received here with the rest of the community.

James invites all disciples to be self-reflective. He wants us not to see superficially what the culture sees, but to go deeper, to see ourselves through God’s eyes. We love our youth unconditionally and we see in them gifts they might not see in themselves. There are certain words that jump out from the passages we heard read this morning: Passion, commitment, faith, fidelity, love, trust, generosity, giftedness, and belovedness. If you go back and read these passages again you will likely name even more. All these words are embodied in our youth ministry. We give thanks to God this day and every day, the giver of all good gifts, for the privilege of ministering among our youth. What a thrill it is to watch their souls blossom and their spirits take flight.