Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Our Scripture this morning confronts the current political climate in this country – a climate of hubris, vindictiveness, and divisiveness. Our faith inspires us to acknowledge, address, and move forward. Our Scripture is a beacon of hope. Proverbs tells us: “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail...Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.” It is important to name what this lesson is NOT saying. It is not saying that those who are vindictive and divisive deserve some wicked punishment, that certainly they will be crushed. Rather, what it is telling us is that when we turn our backs on justice and righteousness, we are living in a wilderness – living in fear and anxiety and insecurity – not knowing how to love or to be loved. This lesson is a beacon of hope because God is always calling us, every one of us, always calling us home, calling us back to God’s love, to God’s inspiration and peace.

Dr. Martin Luther King reminded us, and continues to remind us, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” God’s Kingdom will prevail. God’s love is the ultimate answer. Hope lives. In our Gospel lesson from Mark, we learn about a woman who is a Gentile, an outsider, someone of a different race or ethnic background. When she begged Jesus to save her daughter, Jesus said to her, “‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’” This exchange is disturbing; the language is off-putting. But, the message is that the Gentile woman stood up for herself and reminded Jesus, reminded Jesus, that we are all of one family. Jesus responded, “‘For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.’” I imagine a long pause before he responded to her. I imagine Jesus looking at
her, looking at this woman who has confronted him, reflecting on her words, recognizing her truth and then saying to her, “Go, go to your daughter, she has been saved.” Jesus demonstrates the hope, the ever-present opportunity to reflect on our motivations and behaviors, to recognize the expanse of justice and righteousness, to love more fully.

In June, I watched a great news video about a high-school baseball playoff game. Ty Koehn (pronounced Kane) was the pitcher for Mounds View High School in Arden Hills, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. Mounds View faced Totino-Grace High School from nearby Fridley, Minnesota. Ty struck out the last batter to move the team on to the Minnesota State Championship. However, that last batter on the opposing team was Jack Kocon, a close friend of Ty’s. They met playing sports when they were eight years old. Though they attended different high schools, they remained close friends. As the Mounds View team erupted in celebration, Ty ran straight to the batter box to console his friend. He knew Jack was disappointed, so before celebrating with his teammates, he comforted his friend. These are the stories that call us home, right back to God’s love. These are the stories that remind us of the hope in God’s love.

God’s love is the constant in our lives, through all of our life, the highs, the lows, the celebrations, the challenges, the joys, the heartaches, even the times of turmoil that seem to threaten the ideals upon which this country was founded. God’s love never ceases, never subsides. God’s love prevails all. “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1Cor 13:7). God’s love is the healing balm. God’s love is the path forward. God’s love is the protector in the storm. God’s love is the moderator through the conflict. God’s love is the ultimate answer. At St. Paul’s, we seek God’s love, experience God’s love, share God’s love. St. Paul’s is a safe place to explore how to live in this world; to ask the hard questions and recognize that Jesus does not call us into community to agree on all matters, but calls us to listen to one another with open hearts, so to learn from one another, so to understand life more fully.
We come together to care for one another. We come together to risk being honest with ourselves about our own motivations and behaviors; to know we are forgiven, to know that God’s judgment is not about punishment, but about the opportunity for new life. We come together to experience God’s love, which nurtures our desire to love God and one another. Our faith is life itself.

The bi-partisanship of Senator John McCain’s funeral was inspiring. The eulogists from both parties proclaimed perseverance in the principles on which this country was founded; they proclaimed resoluteness in hope. Former President Barack Obama quoted Hemingway: “Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today.” So, here we go: a new program year. God is welcoming us home! Let us welcome our friends and families and colleagues into this home; let us welcome the stranger into this home. Let us desire for all the peace and inspiration found in God’s love, to live life fully, to be the mustard seed for a loving world. Let us live in hope…and let us pray:

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May God give you grace not to sell yourself short,
Grace to risk something big for something good,
Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.
May God take your minds and think through them.
May God take your lips and speak through them.
May God take your hands and work through them.
May God take your hearts and set them on fire. Amen.