

Scripture Readings and Sermon

September 12, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Proverbs 1:20-33 (Call of Wisdom)

The gates of an ancient city played a major role in the life of that city. Due to the tradition of 'sanctuary', cities were very restrictive about who could enter through the gates. It was mentioned in the Going Deeper about the death of Absalom how many cities had dual gates with a judge who sat in the middle as a filter into the city. As a result, many of the foreign traders would gather around the gates of the cities to trade with the people inside of the cities. Prostitutes were known to frequent these spots to entice customers. In the biblical tradition, prostitutes are often symbolic of the "worldly" temptations which led people away from the teachings of God. To counter this influence, Proverbs tells 'my son' (vs. 8, 10, 15) to listen to the female voice of wisdom instead of the prostitute. Those who ignore her words will fall into temptations and will suffer calamity. Those who are not complacent but rather follow her words will dwell in safety.

Proverbs 1:22 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?"

What does the scripture mean by "simple"?

Could "simple" mean that we put more faith in what we see than in what we do not?

What if we make the simple complex and the complex too simple?

Is the complexity of our world of our own making?

Maybe there is more complexity in spirituality than memorized prayer or Sunday worship?

What if true wisdom is the humility to bow before the infinitely complex God?

Commentary on Mark 8:27-38 (Who Do you Say I Am)

Jesus once again heads to the northern most point of Israel to Ceasarea Philippi near the border with Tyre and on a major trade route between Tyre and Damascus. Today the area is in the disputed territory of the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria. At the foot of Mt. Hermon, this is the fresh water source for the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan, and eventually the Dead Sea. This is why snow on Mt. Hermon is considered a blessing in the Bible since it is the major source of fresh water. In this remote location, Jesus asks the disciples who he is and Peter makes his profession. From Peter's mouth comes a blessing but then Peter rebukes Jesus' talk of death and out comes curses. Peter's proclamation came from God's wisdom but Peter's rebuke came from his human fear of death. Jesus responds by putting death in context, what do you gain by following human wisdom if you loss your soul for an eternity? The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and not the fear of death. The fear of God in this context is the realization that only God can lead us on the path that leads to life even if it is through the cross.

Mark 8:35 For those who want to save their life will lose it

Is this a call to a martyrs death as some in the church have believed?

What makes up a life? Is it simply a heart beat or a breath?

Do not our habits, relationships, and beliefs make up our life?

What is Jesus really asking us to let go of?

Are we ready to give up our comfortable routines and follow Jesus?

Are we willing to make our relationship with God more important than all others?

Are we able to let go of the traditions and beliefs of our families and community?

Commentary on James 3:1-12, (Bridle the Tongue)

The childhood rhyme went, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." This is a lie. Words have a devastating effect on how a person views themselves and others. The first step towards cruelty is to begin to refer to another person as less than human. Once a person is

dehumanized, it becomes much easier for atrocities to occur. Words have the power to tear down or build up. Our faith is evident in the words we proclaim. This is why James follows the discussion about faith needing works with the power of the tongue to give both blessings and curses. If our well of faith is pure, our words should be pure but our mouth often produces both fresh and salty water. Why? Because our hearts are divided between following God's will and following our own will. The only way to bridle the tongue is to surrender our will to God as Jesus did at Gethsemane.

James 3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

Does it surprise you that gossip was considered leprosy under rabbinic law?

When have you experienced the negative effects of gossip?

Has the word gossip been replaced by the term fake news?

Even when people retract what they say, does the damage ever go away?

How has social media caused this "leprosy" to become a pandemic?

How do we contribute to or help stop this pandemic?

Sermon "**Which Wisdom?**"

Jesus tells Peter to set his mind on heavenly things rather than earthly things and in Proverbs God's wisdom cries out to a people focused only on worldly wisdom. James connects with this idea of two wisdoms when he refers to fresh and salt water. The question today, however, is if there are only two wisdoms?

Scriptures address a fairly homogeneous world with one dominant culture. Even the Jewish community was dominated by Greek and Roman thoughts. A culture becomes dominant through various types of media. The basic media is language both written and spoken but then expands to include songs, literature, and popular entertainment. Through media, values and accepted approaches to problems are shaped. A logical approach to problems often correlates to a very precise language structure. But what happens when technology allows us to access media not only worldwide but across time?

Today, an individual can surround themselves with movies and music from a different time period. Where limited technology meant that news once came from a central source, now people can choose to listen to news that only supports their points of view. A cohesive sense of culture and "common sense" is becoming more difficult to find. As a result, it is hard to talk about the wisdom of the world when there are so many from which to choose.

Many of these groups of thought pick and choose aspects of religious teaching that support their core view. They will claim to focus on heavenly things when in fact scriptural wisdom makes up only a small portion of their overall view. Like Peter in the story from Mark today, people from these groups may produce both fresh water (You are the Messiah) and salt water (Peter rebukes Jesus). Jesus reminds us that we must leave all worldly wisdom behind and "get behind him".

Proverbs argues that the foundation of all wisdom is the fear of the LORD. This fear is the acknowledgment that God is God and we are not. We are not the creators of the world or the masters of our universe. Through technology, we may create the temporary illusion of control but all things are fleeting. Everything we make and everything we are will come to an end. Physical death and mortality is the destination of life. God, however, is infinite. In God, we live and move and have our being. Before all things and after all things there has and will be God. The acceptance of our finite spec of an existence in the presence of an infinite and all powerful God should produce fear. From this fear, we gain perspective and gratitude. Priorities shift and human agendas become folly. God no longer become part of our culture but rather we become members of the family of God greater than all culture. Culture then becomes a unique expression within the family like individual bedrooms in a house.

It is only when we stop going to the wells of salt water that we will truly find the abundant life offer by the fresh water of God's wisdom. Only when we begin to see life as a short term gift rather than a right to be held onto that we can truly take up our cross and follow the giver of all gifts. It is

only when we accept the wisdom of our own mortality that we can find hope even in the midst of disaster. Which wisdom will you choose?