

Wisdom Cries

Proverbs 1:20-33 and Mark 8: 27-38

Today is one of the rare Sundays that the Lectionary offers a passage from the Book of Proverbs as one of the readings. If you look up the word “Proverb” in a dictionary, what you will find is some variation of this definition: “A proverb is an easily memorized nugget of wisdom.” And that is exactly what you can expect to find when you open the Biblical Book of Proverbs. Page upon page of pithy one-liners ready to be applied to almost any life situation you might encounter.

It is believed that the Book of Proverbs served as a kind of curriculum for raising young people to lead righteous lives. But this collection of Biblical proverbs is more than an encyclopedia of common sense, distilled from ages of human experience. The entire contents of the Book of Proverbs rests on the assumption that when God created the universe, God created it “good.” And that there is an orderliness to the universe that supports and perpetuates its God given goodness. True Wisdom is rooted not in human ingenuity, but in discerning how to live in harmony with the divine order of what God has created. Disregarding this God inspired Wisdom is given a name in Proverbs. And that name is Foolishness.

And yet, there are places where the Book of Proverbs seems to *not be in harmony with itself!* Let me give you an example. Proverbs chapter 26, verse 4 offers this advice for dealing with a foolish person: *Do not answer a fool according to his folly*, or you yourself will be just like him. Then in chapter 26, verse 5, (which is the very next verse after what I just read!) Proverbs instructs us to *answer a fool* according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. Taken at face value, those two verses—side by side on the page, yet worlds apart in their advice—seem to be in stark contradiction to each other.

Or might the lesson be that Divine Wisdom is something more fluid to than words on paper to be applied like a one size fits all response to complex circumstances. The lesson that there are times and contexts to productively confront foolishness through one strategy and times and contexts that call for a different approach. And that the only way to discern which is which comes through prayerfully seeking understanding from the Divine source of the words.

Wisdom is personified in the Book of Proverbs as a woman who is intent on making others wise, so that the wisdom she imparts will guide people to live righteously and to contribute to creating a more righteous world. Wisdom is portrayed as a living entity; not lifeless words to be applied mechanically to all circumstances. Wisdom is understood not as a *something* to be mastered, but as a *someone* that we are invited to enter into a relationship with. In all the places of human community, from crowded streets to noisy market squares, from busy corners

to city gates, she cries out to be heard, she raises her voice for those who will listen to what she has to teach them. For those who refuse to accept her invitation and take her outstretched hand, the consequences produced by their refusal result in their own undoing. But those who listen to her voice find security and freedom from fear.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do *people* say that I am?” Their responses reveal that, then as now, people had many different opinions about Jesus. Next, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

“You are the Messiah,” Peter answers. But, then as now, Messiah can mean different things to different people. Most Israelites—including Jesus’ disciples--would have agreed that any Messiah worth his salt would be a powerful leader. Someone who would defeat their enemies, make them prosperous and restore their culture to its former glories.

But Jesus gave them a tutorial on what kind of Messiah they should expect him to be—and it was something very different than what they imagined. At the heart of his message was the shocking assertion that he must undergo suffering, rejection and death at the hands of the Romans and his own people. The key word in this lesson was “must.” It wasn’t that Jesus *might* have to go through these things if he couldn’t come up with a better plan on his own. These were sacrifices that Jesus had accepted as an inevitable part of his being the Messiah, because he trusted God’s Wisdom for him. There could be no checking off the boxes of which personal sacrifices he was willing to accept and which sacrifices he would refuse. He must go through it all because in God’s unconventional, but Divine wisdom, this was the only way for Jesus to save the human race.

Human wisdom insisted that the Messiah would experience victory, power and glory; not suffering, rejection and death. Peter was so upset to hear Jesus talk this way that he rebuked Jesus and tried to change his attitude. Jesus responded to Peter’s protests by pointing out that Peter was setting his mind--not on divine things, but on human things. Jesus’ comeback to Peter’s protest still serves to remind us all that the limits of human wisdom can stand in the way of our discovering solutions to life’s problems that can only be discerned by seeking God’s Wisdom.

Albert Einstein was a person of legendary intellect. But he himself was keenly aware of the fallibility of human intelligence. And so, he said, “The world as we have created it is a process of *our thinking*. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” Jesus stood his ground with Peter, and tried to change his thinking. He reiterated, that God’s wisdom would require personal sacrifice. And that God’s wisdom would ask sacrifices of them, too. That they needed to deny themselves, and take up their own crosses, as the Spirit guided them to do. They had to lose their lives that were grounded mostly in the self-interest, competition, and separation

from others that worldly wisdom taught them to value; otherwise, the real life that is rooted in awareness of our unity with God, our connection to others and aligned with God's perfect will, would remain forever out of their reach.

Jesus still calls disciples like you and me to live according to a form of wisdom which is not always instinctive or popular. A wisdom that challenges the narrow human ways of thinking that often makes us feel wise in our own eyes but blinds us to the wisdom of God, that is only discoverable by faith. Those who want to save the life defined by mortal wisdom will lose the blessed life that God has in store for them.

This pandemic--which has frustrated our ability to safely worship together as we are doing this morning—has stubbornly persisted in the tension between two wisdoms that are divided over how to reverse this calamity. One wisdom suspiciously resists personal and public sacrifices like masking and vaccinations as unnecessary burdens and foolishness. The other wisdom supports the belief that it will only be through making those sacrifices that the battle against COVID can possibly be won—and that refusing to make those sacrifices is foolishness.

As Christians, we are called to look to Jesus to sort out which strategy reflects human wisdom and which reflects Divine wisdom. In God's Divine wisdom, the cross Jesus bore for us, and the cross that Jesus asks us to bear for each other go hand in hand. Through the cross on which Jesus died we understand the price Jesus paid to seal our belonging to God. And the crosses Jesus asks us to bear, are evidence that we belong to each other, because Jesus calls us to love one another with the same love with which he loves us.

In his classic "A Tale of Two Cities" Charles Dickens penned a timeless observation. One that rings as eerily true for our present circumstances, as it did for his so long ago.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

I wonder from which side of that register our time will be remembered. As a time of wisdom, belief, light and hope. Or a time of foolishness, incredulity, darkness and despair.

Listen! The Wisdom of the cross cries out! She raises her voice to be heard!

Look! She extends her hand to lift us up and lead us out of our own foolishness into the Wisdom of God.

Whether and how we respond is especially crucial during these desperate days, when the difference between Wisdom and Foolishness can literally be measured in lives saved or lost.

© 2021 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW on September 12, 2021