

Yr. B, Proper 15
August 15, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1553 Words

Lessons: Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalm 34:9-14
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

The initial wisdom of Judaism held that God was actively, *intimately* involved in the world, enforcing right and wrong. The faithful got rewarded, and the wicked got punished—*immediately*. Wisdom meant following the rules.

At the time of the exile, the community's theology changed *a lot*. God was still intimately, actively involved in the world, but the world was nevertheless upside down. The righteous suffered—not by God's hand, but at the hands of the wicked. The evil seemed to prosper. Wisdom held that there *would come a day of reckoning* when just desserts would be served up to the faithful *and* to the wicked.

According to this theological perspective, the righteous have three choices:

- Oppose the wicked and suffer the consequences in the present.
- Go along with the wicked and suffer the consequences in the future.
- (or) Maintain your faithful identity and try to avoid being noticed by the wicked.

I'm indebted to an essay by Thomas Steagald for such an accessible overview of the Wisdom Tradition.¹ I want to add that Mother Marie recently offered a clear application of these ideas in her sermon of July 11th about the story of John the Baptist and Jesus.

“If John had *just kept baptizing in the wilderness*,” Marie noted; “maintaining his faithful identity and keeping his head down; he probably would have lived a longer life.” Instead, John the Baptist opposed the wickedness of Herod Antipas, and he suffered the consequences immediately...you know, the beheading.

Similarly, if *Jesus had just kept healing the sick* and feeding the hungry in rural Galilee, he most certainly would have lived a longer earthly life. Instead, Jesus also confronted the greedy and arrogant authorities in Jerusalem who were collaborating with the wicked Roman and Herodian tyrants. And he suffered the consequences immediately...you know, the cross.

My fear of heights is not a secret around here. In fact, I remember my very first sermon in this pulpit when I told the story of climbing...and—*eventually*—jumping from the high dive as a young boy. Well, this summer during my sabbatical leave, I worked on my fear—not on purpose, but out of necessity. See, you can't really hike too many of those beautiful trails in our national parks out west without walking along some frightening pathways.

The wisdom I gained *through practice*, is to focus only on my next step—not the nearby ledge...not the strong winds pushing and pulling at my body...not the vacuous space peripherally visible off to the right or the left...just the next step...and *then*...the step after that.

You know, there are a lot of pathways that will take you up the mountain in life. Some are better than others. Some are more *challenging* than others. Some are more beautiful than others.

The fact that there is more than one way is a reminder that we are *not* the first people on this journey. I find that comforting. You see, there is wisdom—*visible wisdom*—from those who have gone before.

¹ Thomas R. Steagald, “Theological Essay on Proverbs 9:1-6” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3*, Eds. David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 338-342.

Don't be fooled. It's not necessarily the most well-worn path that you want to take. The great American poet, Robert Frost, expressed this wisdom memorably when he wrote: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the road less traveled by. And it has made all the difference."

You'll remember that Jesus did not take the well-worn path in the 1st century. He rejected the shortcut temptation—presented to him from the very beginning—to just go along with the wicked and rule over all the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus also rejected the temptation to just maintain his faithful identity, keep his head down, and go unnoticed. Indeed, Jesus took *the most narrow path*, the most *difficult* path. He not only comforted the weak; he confronted the strong who were abusing and neglecting the weak.

One of the things I admired in my trekking this summer were the cairns—elegant, little stacks of rocks that someone left behind to mark a pathway that is not so 'well worn' and obvious. People who had gone before us and who experienced something beautiful, meaningful, or memorable—even if it was *more challenging*; (they) wanted to leave behind a sign to help point subsequent travelers like us where we might behold the same glimpse of beauty or a special experience.

Our opening prayer today reminds us that Jesus is our ultimate cairn: We prayed: "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, AND ALSO AN EXAMPLE of godly life...Give us grace to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life..."

He took the road less traveled. He followed the narrow pathway with *more risk, more vulnerability*, more beauty, and more love.

We also beheld a cairn this morning from the Book of Proverbs. "Wisdom has built her house" we hear, and everyone—including the simple-minded—are invited to turn in. "Come, eat of my bread and drink of (my) wine...live and walk in the way of insight."

You see, wisdom is *not* exclusive or tricky or confusing. But she is elusive. Her gate is narrow. You have to be *willing to see* and turn in.

This poem from Proverbs goes on to teach (that), "The fear of the LORD is the *beginning* of wisdom," (v.10) an idea that echoes in the Psalms. Indeed, this morning we sang: "Fear the LORD, you who are his saints, for those who fear the (the LORD) lack nothing."

Please don't misunderstand—this is not a 'fear' of frightful paralysis or a cowering reactivity. No, no, no, no! We're talking/singing about deep reverence—as in... "*Revere* the LORD, you who are his saints!" We're talking about breath-taking awe and the inspirational beauty and splendor of God's grace and love.

Doesn't it make more sense now...why we might *want to* taste and see that the LORD is *good*? Not to be scared out of our wits, but to behold, with deep reverence and breath-taking awe...the goodness and beauty of the LORD. It's like following the cairn, standing on the narrow path, and *finally* looking up—deeply inspired by the beauty of it all.

Now St. Paul explicitly cautions us—don't be foolish. You see, the well-worn pathway in Ephesus and throughout the Empire was debauchery masquerading as the worship of Dionysus. "Be wise," Paul exhorts. "Be filled...overflowing with God's Holy Spirit—pouring out in songs and melodies and thanksgiving.

Hmmm. I guess it is a right and good and joyful thing...always and everywhere to give our thanks to God...Creator of Light and life, gutsy enough to *make us* in the divine image and *call us* to new life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

This, dear people, is wisdom!

So, what are we to do with Jesus' repugnant-sounding words in today's Gospel. He freaks out the Jews who were listening to him that day because he *directly contradicts* the Law of Moses which strictly prohibits blood-drinking or even eating meat (flesh) that still has any blood in it.

Guess what? He was *trying* to get under their skin. He *is trying* to get under *our skin*!

Maybe it is shocking enough for the wisdom to seep in. And the wisdom of Jesus is this: "I want to abide *inside you*—body and soul, *and*...I want *you* to abide in me—body and soul."

Look, there are lots of pathways to choose from. We can choose well-worn pathways—easy to see, easy to follow—going along in order to get along with the wicked—those who abuse and neglect the poor and vulnerable whom Jesus loves.

We can also choose to be faithful, and keep our heads down...like me on some of those trails out west, creeping along slowly, but not fully taking in or sharing all that God has given us.

And then, there's a 3rd way—not always playing it safe, but remaining on the pathway of Jesus, even when it gets narrow or feels risky—not just comforting the weak and vulnerable, but also challenging the proud and the greedy.

The only way I ever have the courage to walk that third pathway, is to *practice*—step by baby step. It is a little easier if we keep reminding ourselves that we are following in Jesus' footsteps...that we are trusting the cairn of his holy life which *points us toward* our Father in heaven.

So, there is Good News in today's Gospel which makes this path even more doable. The Good News is that we follow a Lord who *not only* points us in the right way like a reliable cairn (out there), but who is also traveling with us—abiding *inside us*—strengthening and guiding us from within—body and soul.

We just sang a hymn which expresses this wisdom beautifully:

If thou but trust in God to guide thee,
and hope in him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength what-e'r betide thee,
and bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on a rock that nought can move.²

There's your strength. There's your courage. There's your wisdom.

Dear people, we know the way. We know the truth. We know the Life. His name is Jesus.

Amen.

² Georg Neumark, *The Hymnal 1982*, #635.