

Seeking Wisdom,

September 13, 2009

St. Paul's United Church, Richmond, ON

15th Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Proverbs 1:20-33

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

James 3:1-12

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Mark 8:27-38

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Every day we are faced with some decision. Information about this and that surround us: issues about family life, ethical concerns, political questions rain down on us daily. We have to decide how to respond and often, because the information is contradictory or confusing, we don't know what to do or say or act. Wisdom is scarce.

The passage from Proverbs could have been written in our time. We could easily have read it in Maclean's or the newspaper. Wisdom cries out in the street. She raises her voice in the town squares, she calls out at the busiest corners. She looks for those who heed her voice and follow her ways but she finds none. Calamity and disaster prevail. Fear and terror. Death and injury and hurt. It could be written about Iraq or Afghanistan; Israel or Lebanon.

Like us the Israelites faced an uncertain future. They too lived in a time of war. They were in fear of invasion, famine, calamity, destruction. The future looked bleak. They were right to be worried. The author of Proverbs connects the circumstances that they face with the state of their spiritual life. He says that they are facing disaster because they have not followed the way of Yahweh. They have forgotten who God is. Now when they are in a crisis they call upon God but they are so far from the habit of faith, they are so distant from their own spirits and their own spiritual needs and desires that they cannot identify them. They have acted foolishly for so long and are so out of practice in the art of wisdom that now when they desperately need wisdom they cannot find it; not in themselves or anywhere else.

When the writer of Proverbs writes that Wisdom is crying in the streets, he is saying that God is present in the world. It is right here in front of us. We need wisdom so we can make choices about how we are to live well. We need it to commit oneself to God and noble causes. It is to take up the cross which gives us wisdom to commit to worthy causes.

Wisdom is quite literally part of God, an aspect of God's being. The best way to think of it is like a candle. When you light a candle both heat and light emanate from it. We can see the candle and feel the candle. Well, God is like that. God is present with us in the world in many ways. Wisdom is one of them. Wisdom is an emanation of God, it is an aspect of God's being that we can experience in our lives, in the world.

Wisdom is the ability to make choices, based on free will. It is not a freedom from influences but a freedom to make creative responses and create novel outcomes. Becoming more creative and innovative, is the meaning of wisdom. It is to seek creative solutions which includes risking failure. Wisdom means we have the power to influence the direction of history. To achieve creative responses we need to identify those things that block out wisdom.

Paradoxically taking up a cross is the beginning of wisdom that frees us. Our texts help us understand the paradox of taking up a cross that gives life, and the paradox of losing one's life saves it. It is a wisdom that comes from connecting to that which is worthy of us. It is to let go of attachment to transient things. The texts reaffirm how leaving behind the familiar and safe territories can lead us to wisdom. They remind us, also, that the road to wisdom involves a cost.

We get attached to things that are perishing, are temporary. We have certain hymns and ways of worshipping and we get attached to them. We forget they are only way-stations or aids to help us reach God, time sensitive. We confuse important yet temporary explanations with the fullness of religious experience.

This is why we stop singing certain hymns or reject some theological ideas because they get in the way. An example is the idea of vicarious atonement, where Jesus had to die for our sins. Taking up the cross is not referring to a notion of human sacrifice to appease a vengeful God. Mark does not mean this when Jesus responds to Peter about Jesus death. What is suggested is the idea of a noble death where the hero dies faithful to the cause of transformation. This sacrifice is a template for followers, and there is a cost when one challenges the interests that bring disharmony.

Jesus is the voice of Wisdom, Wisdom's child, an emanation of very God, present in the world in Peter's own time. Jesus is a voice who cries in the wilderness and in the city. A voice that continually calls us to relationship with himself and with God's self. Jesus is the voice of wisdom that brings peace and comfort and ease and security and well-being and abundance and freedom from dread. All these things that we need in our lives and in our world. He is not sent to die but to announce that the kingdom of God is right here, a reality in human experience. Jesus remains true to the end, he risks and this puts him into danger and leads to the cross.

This kind of wisdom asks whether what we have committed our energy to that which is worthy of us. Is this where we ought to commit our energy? This is the discipline of letting go of those things that possess us.

To take up the cross is find our well being through service to the world. It is to become those who work, without fear, to renew our world.

This is the wisdom of taking up the cross. We are reassured that we can be confident that when we leave our homes and each other to go to work and school every day, whenever we embark on another day of uncertainty, holy wisdom accompanies us. No matter what life brings, God is continually present with us. God has promised that we who seek wisdom and listen for her voice will be free from insecurity, unease and dread. That is a great gift: it is the gift of faith. And it is here, for each one of us.

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