

13 September 2009  
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We've designated this Sunday as Welcome Back Sunday, so...Welcome Back! It's more than just a theme really. I think that in looking at both the context of the—this little theme of 'Welcome Back', it's the beginning of the new program year.

There's something deeper there that I'd like to touch on and the readings are conducive to that. We've got a reading from Proverbs which is part of the wisdom literature, we've got a reading from James which is regarded by some as the only book of wisdom literature in the New Testament, and then we've got this interesting story in the Gospel of Mark that we heard where Jesus says, "Who do they say that I am?" and they make a few stabs at it and he does some explaining—more on that later.

But what about wisdom? The part of Proverbs that we have today is really a reproof to all of us and it's put in the voice of Sophia, of wisdom. It's a reproof for being what the writer calls simple. Simpleton is a word that might be synonymous with that. That we know what we need to do and not do. Remember the little book Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten? Well, this is like that. Wisdom is not rocket science.

But what happens is that somehow our egos or some part of us thinks that we know better, or we don't care, or—you know, I have to think back to the warning labels on cigarettes. And people pick up a pack of cigarettes that first time—they've never smoked a cigarette in their life—and there's that warning label. And we light up. And Wisdom here says: "I will mock when panic strikes. I will laugh at your calamity. I told you: If you smoke these you may well get terrible lung diseases that will kill you." We still do it.

If you drive eighty miles per hour down Interstate 5 and you come in contact with another vehicle it's probably a good idea to have your seat belt on. And we don't. And then it's tragic.

And we know what to do. We know what to do. We know. We really do know. And we don't do it.

Or we do things that we shouldn't because there's something in us that says: Oh, puh, isn't that silly. And then we sow the seeds of calamity. And then we're surprised when it comes out of the ground and bears fruit. Wisdom—and it says right here at the bottom, it says, "Waywardness kills the simple and complacency of fools destroys them but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease without dread of disaster." And so much of the disasters and calamities in our lives come because we or somebody else has been staying simple - and not in a Quaker sense.

So along comes James. And James is just offering a bit of wisdom. It's basically saying, "Friends, if you don't curb your tongue, you're going to create disaster." You know, I think if you just look at our current civic life have we ever been better examples

of what James is talking about than now? It's probably been going on for forty years now but it's still on an upward spiral. Or a downward spiral, depending on how you want to look at this.

That wisdom would say that we don't scream insults at one another and call it debate or public discourse. It is tearing us apart. It's destroying us. And wisdom would say, "I laugh at your calamity. You're doing this to yourselves." This is not something that is happening from the outside; we're doing it to ourselves. So this is all bleh, bleh, man, this just sounds awful, goodness gracious!

I remember hearing a definition—and this may seem like a huge leap but it's really not—that stewardship is everything that happens, everything we do after we say 'I believe.' And I think that what wisdom literature primarily is focused on is lessons in stewardship: What we do with what we have been given.

So we get this life, we get these gifts, we get this world, and wisdom says, "You take care of those things. And you make sure that this world, this creation that is created in *balance* stays that way." And that when you do—because we are the crown of creation—when we do everything possible to keep things in balance, when they get out of balance we get them back in balance—when we do everything we can to live in balance, life will be easier.

It doesn't mean that lousy things won't happen, it doesn't mean that there will be no hurricanes or earthquakes or diseases, but when those things do occur, we do those things to bring things back into balance. And maybe we do some things that might help them not to happen in the first place.

So everything that we do once we say we believe is about living in this world in a state of wholeness and as it says on the front of your service leaflets - and you will see this a lot in the coming months - **all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God.**

All that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. That's wisdom. That is a profound wisdom teaching. And when we live that way other things seem to fall into place around us. How we use our money, how we foster our relationships, how we raise our children, how we treat one another across borders, how we treat one another across political lines, how we treat one another period. How we treat the creation. All of those things are wisdom.

When Jesus is walking down the road with 'the gang' and he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" A couple of them make a stab at it. Some report what they hear others saying. And then Peter (God bless him!) he kind of [says] "You're the Messiah!" Jesus' response is "Shhh! Don't say that." Because Peter's got this notion about what the Messiah is that's coming out of popular culture and it's basically King Arthur is going to ride in and inaugurate Camelot. He's going to whip all the baddies and everything's going to be great.

Clearly he'd not been studying much in the Hebrew Scriptures because the Messiah is generally depicted as the suffering servant. And when Jesus goes on and talks about what that's going to entail—it's going to entail sacrifice. He's going to be killed and resurrected in three days. And Peter in his devotion says, "Don't say that!" It's probably that the idea breaks his heart. That's not what he'd signed on for. He signed on to be Lancelot. But the reality was that it's going to require sacrifice on our part to be disciples.

And so when Jesus says "Who do they say I am?" in a way comes back at us: Who do you say you are? And we say that we are disciples of Christ. That changes everything. And the life that we live is for a different purpose than the world's purpose. And all of the distractions and all of the things that become part of the imbalance that in a sense knock our props out from under us, that take us away from the center, from the whole, all of those things are what throw us completely out of kilter. It's the source of our calamity. It's the source of our pain.

We have a tradition that focuses on stability and on wisdom. And part of that wisdom is that weekly we gather together and worship. We partake of the body and blood of Christ. We sing songs together. We recite the Psalms together. We gather afterward or before in fellowship. We do these things week after week after week. And the more consistently we do that the more in balance we find ourselves.

We take it a step further with the Daily Office. It's an integral part of our tradition where in the morning, at noon, in the late afternoon or early evening and at night, there are available to us little rites that involve scripture and psalm and prayer. Day after day, just coming home. Re-centering. A rhythm; over and over because the life we live keeps us constantly out of balance.

And the more that we can do to just center ourselves - sometimes it might just be developing that habit of having a word or coming back to our breath even if it's just for a moment when we lose it in traffic and we want to flip somebody off - instead we cross ourselves! Or we offer a prayer or we go to our breath or we're feeling stressed and we just have sense enough, wisdom enough to stop and get our feet under us, to pull ourselves together and to insist on that. To make that a priority so that we don't let the world around us get the best of us, that we come home, that we stay centered, and when we go out of balance to pull ourselves together. And that we look at moderation in our lives. We look at the way we spend our time and we spend our money and the way we work and the way we relate to one another and we see all of this as opportunity to come home. To come back to center.

And if we think about the symbol of our faith—(pointing to the cross) there's a big one right there—and think about the center, coming back to center, coming back to the heart of Christ. That's our home. Welcome back!

Amen.