

Wisdom and the Joy of Being Wrong
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 16, 2018
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Texts: Proverbs 1.20-33
Psalm 19
James 3.1-12
Mark 8.27-38

Maybe it was your 6th grade teacher or your know-it-all-neighbor or maybe even one of your parents on a bad day. For me it was my band instructor. He was so scary; especially close to competitions. If you weren't listening closely to his instruction or if you came to his class unprepared he'd start going down the line and if you didn't have the piece down cold, he would let loose. It wasn't just me. My brother recently told me he still has anxiety dreams with Mr. Taylor from time to time. Nobody likes being humiliated like that; to be the subject of a peevish lecture running down your failures and mistakes.

I have to confess that our texts for today – on first reading – sound a little bit like that. Wisdom personified in the book of Proverbs is out on the street corner and she is going off! The book of James is a blistering word of caution about the kind of trouble we can get into when we run our mouths. Any lecture that uses the imagery of fire six times in two sentences is not playin'! And when Jesus puts Peter in his place...let's just say I doubt Peter looks back on that moment with any measure of pride.

Is that the way we should hear these texts today? Is that how we should think about wisdom? As the stern, demanding, critical voice of whoever it was in your past who got off on putting you in your place? Well it's tempting if you think of these words of wisdom being **about** someone else. Remember Gordon's sermon last week where he began playfully imagining everyone on the pulpit side having a conversation **about** everybody on the lectern side? (I wondered if I would show up today to find everyone on the west side!) There is a certain measure of twisted pride

that comes from seeing yourself as the one up above assessing and correcting.

It's easy to hear these texts through that lens. When you live in a world where that is the game, posturing and pretending and covering your tracks becomes second nature. It's all about image; how people see you and how you measure up in their eyes. If you do make a mistake, you do everything you can to keep people from knowing about it. I still remember so clearly when a therapist tried to help me understand this game as I've just described it. I was in my middle twenties complaining about some power struggle I was in the middle of. I honestly don't recall if it was professional or personal but I will never forget when she said "Jill, do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?"

The compulsion to be right all the time – to be seen as good, competent, strong – whatever word captures the juice of this dynamic for you....this compulsion is the enemy of wisdom. As I said to the children, wisdom is about more than knowing things. It's about taking what one knows and putting it into practice. What serves wisdom more than raw intellect is the capacity to learn. As James acknowledges, all of us make many mistakes. The question is can we acknowledge them; not for the sake of self-flagellation but for the sake of learning.

You get a very different picture when you look at Proverbs through the lens of love resisted. At first it does sound cold and harsh in vs. 26 when Wisdom promises to laugh when calamity comes or mock when panic strikes. But it takes a very different tone when you think of it as the exasperated voice of someone who has been trying in vain to get through to someone she loves who will not listen and does not learn; who keeps making the same mistakes and is running head long toward destruction refusing to receive any correction or support or guidance. I hear in this piece of poetry the pathos of God; the grief expressed as rage that comes when love is resisted. As you walk through the piece from Proverbs, you can hear the longing of God for us to receive the offering of wisdom's thoughts and council, of her correction and instruction. She has so much to give and we have so much to learn but only if we can find the posture and position that makes it possible.

This story from Mark reveals both. Peter uncovers both the posture and the position as he steps in it here with Jesus in this text. Always more fun to learn through other people's mistakes than our own – right? I want to observe something before we look at this text more closely. This is not the first or the last moment when Peter will play the fool with Jesus. Eventually, he gets to this place of strength and clarity where his passion will serve the purposes of God so powerfully. Just look at him on the day of Pentecost. He only gets there because of moments like this one. Or maybe to say it more precisely because of what he learns and integrates **after** moments like this one. If he was more concerned with his image among the disciples such that he hung back and played it safe and never took risks, he would not get moments like this. Crucible moments where his mistakes pull a profound and clarifying word from Jesus straight into his heart and mind in a way he will never forget.

So first the posture. This passage comes on the heels of a healing story that is rich with multiple layers of meaning. It's the one where the blind man comes to Jesus and he puts saliva on his eyes and asks him "Can you see anything?" And the man can see light and objects moving but it isn't clear. So Jesus lays his hands again and this time "(the man) looked intently and his sight is restored, and he saw everything clearly."¹

As Lamar Williamson points out in his commentary on this text, these stories in the center of Mark's gospel are critical to understanding what the posture of discipleship requires from us. Up until this passage, the disciples had witnessed Jesus' power. They had seen him heal the sick and cast out demons, they had heard his profound teaching, they watched as the crowds gathered around and his popularity soared. That is what they had seen up until this point. Like the question posed to the man who could see only in part but not yet the whole, Jesus asks them "Who do people say that I am?...Who do YOU say that I am?"²

Peter offers the right words when he says that "You are the Messiah" but he does not yet have a clear vision what for that means. In vs. 31, Jesus

¹ Mark 8.23-25.

² Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009),

pivots away from that ministry of power they had witnessed in Galilee and turns toward the suffering that is to come in Jerusalem. He warns them that his prestige and popularity is all going to fall away when he stays true to the values of God's realm and it offends the powerful and elite among them. It is not all glory and honor and accolades. There is suffering and betrayal and rejection ahead. He will die. But none of that will not stop God's realm.

Peter doesn't realize that he, like the blind man, is seeing but not fully understanding. Because he doesn't realize what it is he does not yet know, he steps into the posture of authority and dares to rebuke Jesus as if he were the patron and Jesus were the disciple.³ That word *rebuke* is used to describe Jesus' authority when he rebukes the winds of a storm or the demons that possess. It is not the posture of a student or disciple who knows that he still has so much to learn.

So Jesus puts him in his place not to demean him or humiliate him but so that he can continue on this trajectory of learning and wisdom. When Jesus tells Peter to get behind him, he is showing him the position that gives him the best vantage point for learning everything he can possibly learn. Granted he does so with rather colorful language calling him the adversary or Satan. That position behind Jesus is the very same word used in the next verse when he calls all of us to follow him. It's the same Greek word in both verses that literally means *after*.⁴ At the end of the day, Jesus isn't "putting Peter in his place" at least not the way we mean that expression of putting some one down. Jesus will later say to all of his disciples in the gospel of John: "(You)will do greater works than (the works I have done)..."⁵

The position is not about being above or below. It's about being "with" him. It's a relational position with an open posture. It's about the joy of being wrong when those mistakes lead us to change course and to learn. Around the time I began sharing some of my experience over these last months of struggling to find the right path to be responsive and wise in the

³ Ibid, 153.

⁴ Ibid, 153.

⁵ John 14.12, NRSV

work of justice and faith, one my Elders shared something with me that I read every day for a time. By the way, they are really your Elders too! I just feel the strength of support and connection when I call them “my Elders.”

I want to share with you as I close the words she shared with me that come from Thomas Merton in his *Letter to a Young Activist*.⁶ He is describing so beautifully the wisdom Jesus is offering to his disciples; the kind of wisdom we all need to embody if we are to be of use in God’s realm. Merton writes:

“Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. You start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of the personal relationship that saves everything.”

Friends, If we want to be followers of Jesus, may it be so for us.

And now: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer.” Amen.

⁶ You can read the whole piece on this blog:
<https://soulreport.wordpress.com/2014/08/12/merton-letter-to-a-young-activist/>