

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 14

Proper 19
Year B
RCL



Proverbs 1:20-33
Psalm 19:1-4,13-14
Mark 8:27-38

The Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Proverbs 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street;
 in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
 at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
 and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
 I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused,
 have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
 and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
 I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
 and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
 when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
 they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you

are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

SERMON

Last Sunday, I talked about the kind of Christianity that comforts us by making no demands upon us. This Sunday, let's talk about uncomfortable Christianity – the kind that challenges us to take up our individual crosses. I think it is not the sort of Christianity most of us grew up with, at least until the Civil Rights movement awoke us from our complacency. As I reflect on my childhood at First Presbyterian, I remember Sam Curry going on about things I had no clue about but which were supposed to do me a world of good if I would not wiggle, or put my feet on the pew (and could stay awake). I remember actually looking forward to reciting the Apostle's Creed as a blessed break from the general tedium. I remember Sunday School classes which involved coloring pages and pages of black and white Biblical figures depicted with surprisingly child-

like Western European faces. I suspected, even then, that the purpose of that enterprise was to keep us kids quiet. I don't recall anything that might have moved the coming of the Kingdom forward. I was not challenged. I was bored out of my gourd!

There. THAT should make you uncomfortable and that is my intention. I'm reminded that the first step to true improvement is to recognize that you have to improve at all. That doesn't happen without discomfort and it's only human for us to avoid that recognition with considerable stubbornness. And we do, church. We certainly do. I remember seeing a cartoon depicting a pastoral search committee summing up its conclusions.

“So we're looking for a young, forward-thinking and energetic pastor with new ideas who won't change anything.”

That's us, all right. We need to remind ourselves that

if we keep doing what we've been doing, we'll keep getting what we've been getting. The uncomfortable part comes when we ask ourselves if that's good enough. If it is not good enough, what would be better? The answer I often hear proposed is a return to living Biblical lives. Certainly, our culture's Biblical literacy is pretty slight. Bishop John Shelby Spong, who I am disciplining myself to read, said:

In the southern culture in which I was raised a special reverence was accorded to the book we called the “Holy Bible.” ... Few homes would be without a family Bible as part of their permanent furnishings. In my childhood home that Bible was always prominently displayed on the coffee table in our living room, where no one could miss seeing it. I do not recall, however, that it was ever read, either silently or out loud. Its primary function seemed to be little more than a volume in which special moments in life's transitions

were recorded.¹

Can I have an amen if that sounds familiar? One Christmas Eve, dad thought that reading the birth story of our Lord might distract us kids from the dreams of avarice laid out beneath the tree. He couldn't find it, and dad was a faithful churchman all his life. As he continued his remarks, Bishop Spong reached a surprising conclusion:

The primary response to this mentality, and it is a response that is growing rapidly, is to abandon all religion and to take up citizenship in the “secular city.” Proponents of this stance no longer see any relevance in religion or the Bible for their lives today.

They see no alternative to dismissing all religion in general and Christianity in particular, regarding it as something left over from the childhood of our humanity, and they want little to do with it. For such questioners either biblical literalism or the rejection of

¹ “Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World” by John Shelby Spong

all religion seem to be their only choices. One factor that both of these responses have in common is that they share a similar profound ignorance about the Bible.

It's that last thought I want you to focus on. Those who embrace Biblical literalism and those who reject all religion share a similar profound ignorance about the Bible. Is that not the most remarkable thing imaginable to ponder? When we disagree, we disagree over the Bible, as if that were the point. As important as Biblical understanding is, it is not the point. If I had to reduce it all to one point, in fact, it would be these few words from Micah:

He has shown you, O mortal,
what is good.
And what does the Lord re-
quire of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with
your God.

The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth shows us clearly how such a thing can be done. What is needed, it seems to me, is a quest for a Jesus-centered life. What is needed, it seems to me, is for those of us called to the Christian life to stop Googling up Bible passages which agree with our prejudices and biases and instead devote ourselves to the advice of Jesus:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

In a remarkably informative article² forwarded to me by Rev. Ike at First Christian, Thom Schultz argues:

It's not so much that people aren't centering their lives around the Bible. It's that too many aren't centering their lives around Jesus.

Yes, I know the Bible contains the literary account of Jesus. But I'm afraid, because of how some have promoted their ministries,

² "Bible-Centered . . . or Jesus-Centered?" *Holy Soup*, September 8, 2015

that the culture has been given the impression that the church's mission is the promotion of biblical scholarship. It seems the Bible has been elevated above its author.

Ouch! There's your uncomfortable, right there. He went on to quote Rick Lawrence.

“The story of God, contained in these pages, revolves around a Person, not a set of principles. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we discover our true identity and purpose in life.”

My dad, faithful churchman but poor Bible scholar, led the most inoffensive, other-directed life I had ever seen until I met my brother in law. Is his inability to locate the nativity story in any way important in comparison to the rest of his loving, giving life? I can't think so. If the dwindling memberships of our churches are the problem we are tasked to address, then we need to be more clear about what we are about. We need to be seen

less as up-tight moralists besotted with the sins of others and more as seekers after wisdom.

For wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Jesus' instruction to "Take up your cross and follow me" is a call to leave behind the sanitized, feel-good, boutique, therapeutic spirituality, that makes no demands, calls for no sacrifice, asks for no conversion, entails no battle against sin, but only soothes and affirms³, and turn to the self-denying path shown us by Jesus. It is time and past time for us to become wise for:

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing

³ Timothy Dolan

and fools hate knowledge?

Wisdom is taught in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, known as the Christ. Take up your cross and follow, church. Take up your cross and follow.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The whole sermon can be summarized in two sentences and they are the most important two sentences to hear this week:

“The story of God, contained in these pages, revolves around a Person, not a set of principles. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we discover our true identity and purpose in life.”

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:

The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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