

**September 13, 2009**

## **Wisdom Calls**

Proverbs 1 Mark 8

This is the time of year when students are going back to school...some of them leaving home either for the first time, or after a summer at home. How many of you have that kind of thing going on in your life?

It's a tender moment, isn't it, when you send your child off...either wave goodbye at the airport, or drive away after setting them up in residence or an apartment. I'm not a parent myself but I have some sense of the layers of feeling that go with that. You want SO much for them...there's so much you want to say...to tell them....and mostly you just end up saying "be good, be careful - I love you" – and hope that they have some sense of the ocean of emotion behind that little wave.

If you could say to your child, about to enter adulthood – if you could say to them everything you want them to know...what would it be?

The book of Proverbs is a book for just that. It has a long literary history, of course, and I'm giving only part of it here....but it's a fascinating book that gathers up folk wisdom from generations, reflects some Egyptian academic work of the time, and puts it together in what was used as a text for educating the young Jewish boys whose families were able to send them to boarding school in Jerusalem. This would be during the monarchy ... when those who were financially able would send their sons away to learn to be men ... to be educated in the ways of the world. (That's helpful to know for lots of reasons but one of those is that it explains why it's written from a male perspective, right? Women in those days were simply not educated in that formal way)

Among other things, it includes a collection of folk wisdom and lessons easily learned because they are in short, sometimes rhyming, couplets. The kind that get in your head and stay there almost in spite of you. The kind your grandmother used to say.

Some of them in our own society are....

A stitch in time....

Too many cooks ....

Many hands make.....

A penny saved is....

They're great eh? How do you know those? They're just part of the air somehow. Proverbs has chapters of those...read some of them. (chapter 11... use some) The content is EXACTLY the kind of thing you'd want to tell your son sending him off into the world. The main themes: work hard, don't be lazy, don't hang around with people who will lead you astray, watch your mouth, listen more than you speak, tell the truth, and beware of loose women.

Really. Read it!

And the world view of the book...the deeper assumptions behind this writing, is exactly what we talked about last week. It's an example of Wisdom literature.

To review: There are three basic worldviews reflected in Scripture: the Priestly tradition sees God as primarily encountered in the worship life of the people, in prayer, hymns, sacrifices and communal worship. The prophetic tradition on the other hand sees worship as something that can get twisted by too much focusing on petty detail and not on God, and so the prophet is a solitary individual who has often had a dramatic revelation from God and whose job it is to bring the community back into line, back to the covenant. God as encountered primarily by individuals, often in extraordinary ways such as dreams and visions.

And finally this: the Wisdom tradition, which sees God mostly in the ordinary life of the world...in common sense and in ethical living and in reaching out in flawed but genuine ways to those who need us, in the searching for wisdom. This is a universal worldview ... it assumes that God is present and available to all flesh, to all people, and that this divine presence is built into the fabric of the world and within us, not something that has to be begged for or received by miraculous intervention; nor is it for only some religions.

That's a fast review but does it make sense?

Ok, so Proverbs reflects very much that latter sense of Wisdom. The young men of the time were sent to learn to be the best young men they could be. How? By learning to be wise.

Can I just as an aside but I think it's important – go to the gospel text for today? The question “who do you say that I am?” is in some ways THE question of the church – each generation, each individual and community who claims Jesus as worthy to be followed, to be praised, ...we all have to answer and keep answering that question. Who IS he anyway? Classically that's called Christology, but it just means how you understand who this man is.

If we were to go back to the three scriptural worldviews what would the answer be? Well, for the Priestly tradition, emphasis on worship and sacrifice as the ways to encounter God, Jesus becomes first of all THE sacrifice. You have to accept the premise that the world is so flawed that nothing but sacrifice will do to bring it back to God....and if you do, then for Christians, Jesus becomes the sacrifice....God's own self making the sacrifice because nothing we can do ourselves can make it right. And then later, Jesus becomes the high priest as well, (book of Hebrews for example) who intercedes on our behalf.

On the other hand, the prophetic way of looking at things would say no – Jesus, a prophet, uniquely but in the way of prophets before him, experienced God's call, and was called to speak the truth to a wayward people. And like they did to the prophets before

him they killed him rather than listen. So his death was not an atonement for sin as it is in the priestly world, but rather the sad but logical consequence of having spoken out for justice and called the people back to ways that were too uncomfortable for them to bear.

For the Wisdom world view....Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom. Built into the fabric of creation, there at creation with God, not apart from but organically one with creation, calling us to find within ourselves and in our own world the resources, the strength, the wisdom we need to live lives that honour the Creator. Jesus, the embodiment of Wisdom. His death is not as important as his life, and his death, and subsequent resurrection, part of the way of the world; its mystery and continuing life.

Who do you say that I am he asks? And we answer, depending on our own experience and world view. And that's the way it's supposed to be.

Back to those Jewish boys learning to be men....and back to your kids, going away to university or to find work.... And back, as well, to YOU, as we start up another year of church and community life after the summer.

What is the wisdom we'd gather and give to them, and to ourselves if we could? What is the core, the heart of it all? And what would you say if language were adequate to reflect the depth of your heart?

Of all the things I'd say....I think the words of the Psalm today are just wonderful. The life of faith, the law of God, the word of the Lord - is sweet. Sweeter than the honey in the comb. I'd wish for our children a sense that living in a way that's worthy of the awesome gift of Life that we've been given - living wisely and with faith - that's where the sweetness of life is to be found.

I'd wish for them a sweet life...not easy, necessarily, not always happy but sweet in the way the Psalmist means. Sweet like the honey - like the life's work of those bees from whom we could learn so much....like the earthy, thick, stuff of the earth that nourishes and even heals. The hope, the assurance, the challenge, the sense of purpose that you start to taste, and you like it more and more and then it gets all over you and pretty soon you're covered with it and if you try to get rid of it, it just gets all over more of you....I'd wish them life, hope, purpose like that. Like honey in the comb.

I'd want them, and you, to know that as you begin planning, what courses will you take, what groups and committees will you give your energy to....that there ought to be sweetness in that. Something for YOU. It ought to be a joy...be satisfying, nourishing in some way. Duty is good, and of course there are always positions open and jobs to be done....but when you do them, I'd wish for you that you get something out of it for yourself as well....and can we help you with that? What are your spiritual needs and gifts, and how can we match those to the work that we're asking of you here and in the community?

I'd want them to know that life is meant to be enjoyed and savoured...that God does NOT require us to a duty that is painful and boring...but rather, that living justly and ethically and creatively and wisely – while sometimes more taxing and scary than we had planned on...and sometimes does require sacrifice and entails pain....in the end, living that way is the way to life, to sweetness, to joy and fulfillment.

I went to choir practice last week and as I was listening to the anthem I was thinking about this. To know God is to live again, to know God is to love again...that's pretty deep stuff. I don't know if you've ever been at a place in your life where you've been hurt, damaged, frightened or abused....and when you've withdrawn for survival and to keep yourself sane you simply don't let yourself love, live, feel, pray...too scary. Too dangerous. I THINK that part of what the choir has called us to....and what Wisdom would say to us today is ....

Open yourself to sweetness...to the softness and thick, difficult sweetness that can make your teeth ache, but is also the way to life. To know God is to love again. To know God is to live again – to pray again....to be open and not to let the pain have the last word. Sweetness like that. That's wisdom. That's what is calling to us from the streets and city squares....and from the depths of our own fragile and resilient hearts.

This in itself is a kind of cross. Jesus calls us to take up our cross today – I don't know what that cross is for you but – let it be at least in part the cross of real depth. The risk of caring, leaving you open to pain and the courage to keep open even when it hurts. The joy of knowing that to bear pain for one another is the sweetest thing we will ever be called upon to do

May God bless you as you think about these things

Amen and amen.