

## 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13—4:8.**

**Proverbs 31:10-31** concludes the book of Proverbs. Proverbs, of course, is an examination of the biblical understanding of wisdom. The first third of the book (1:1-9:18) is an introduction to this theme. In this introduction, wisdom is put forth not as the accumulation of information but as the shaping of character. It basically deals with how one should act in order to be at one with the natural and historical order that God has created. Its primary theological claim is that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7; 9:10). The most striking reality about the book of Proverbs is that it personifies Wisdom as a woman who should be sought after, found and possessed!

The second part of Proverbs (10:1-31:9) are the actual proverbs, each of which presents an insight on how one should act in order to be at one with God and God’s creation. Those proverbs have to do with one’s relationship to God, one’s relationship to society, commitment to the poor and one’s relationship to the created order. It is all intensely practical, dealing with acted-out wisdom rather than understanding esoteric truths.

But the most intriguing part of Proverbs is how its unknown author chooses to end this book. Proverbs 31:10-31 is a description of a specific woman who lives out wisdom in the actions of her everyday life. This example of a wife and mother going about her everyday life and ordering her household is the application in “real time” of what wisdom lived out is supposed to be. It is the humanized counterpart of personified Wisdom.

It is important to note that this poem with which the book of Proverbs ends is an acrostic poem. That is, each of the 22 verses of the poem begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. Thus, by making it into an acrostic, the author is suggesting that Wisdom as woman is personified fully in this example of a capable wife and mother who brings order, purpose and love to her world and the people of her world. She is, in essence, the authentic example of lived-out Wisdom from “A” to “Z”!

“A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not harm, all the days of her life” (31:10-12). Thus, this picture of the “capable wife” begins.

As acted-out wisdom, this woman is described in several ways. As a wise woman, she is of immense benefit to her husband (vss. 11-12). She manages the household, its children and servants (vv. 13-19) -- and this includes its economy, for she’s a strategic moneymaker in the family. She is the one in the household that is sure that the family not be centered in itself, but in commitment to its community and Hebrew society (vv. 20-23). That includes managing that family’s commitment to the poor by following the Law’s provisions to eliminate poverty (v. 20). It also includes so managing home affairs that it removes all such concerns from the husband so that he might concentrate on being engaged in public life, working for the good of his community, city and society (v. 23). She is to be the spiritual, moral, ethical and molding center of her household and family (vv. 24-28).

This acrostic that describes lived-out biblical wisdom ends, “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates” (vv. 29-30). Thus ends the book of Proverbs.

And what an ending! The life and the work of Godly wisdom, lived out in this woman, ends with the pivotal observation, “a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised”. The book of Proverbs began by stating that the very nature and essence of wisdom is that one is to live in “the fear of the Lord” – that is, centered upon obedience to God lived out in daily life. Thus, this woman is an example of what it means to truly be wise, for she lives in the fear of the Lord! True wisdom is found in living life in wholehearted obedience to God. When you do, then all these things will be added to you!

**Psalm 1** contrasts two types of people – those chosen by God to be faithful to the Law, and those who choose to reject it.

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper” (vss. 1-3).

The psalm begins by reflecting upon those people who chose to embrace God and follow God’s Law. They are “happy” because they both deliberately choose to avoid the way of the wicked and consciously and continuously choose God’s way. These faithful ones are likened to trees drawing their nourishment from a nearby stream. As followers of Yahweh, they are focused on receiving nourishment from God on a continuing basis, and are totally centered on living both their private and public life in obedience to a Law that requires acts of justice, the equitable sharing of one’s wealth and the centering of one’s life in the worship and service of God. For when one continues to be spiritually nourished, he or she is building the inner resources that will be used in their living justly in the world.

But there is another kind of person. “The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (vss. 4-6).

The first thing to keep in mind is that the author is not writing about a heathen person who worships another god than Yahweh. Instead, the psalmist looks at Hebrew people who do not follow the Law and live their lives for their own ends. They may believe in Yahweh, but they actually live their lives choosing to act unjustly, exploitatively and oppressively and thus deny God in their actions.

It is intriguing what the Psalmist writes about such a person. He is “like chaff that the wind drives away”. It is as if he does not exist! He is “not so” (that is, he is not to even be noticed). In other words, the actions “of the wicked” end up ostracizing him from the Jewish community. And not only do the people ignore him; God ignores him as well. “The wicked will not stand in

the judgment”. It is not that he will be judged negatively for his actions; it is that he will be eliminated from any relationship with God, even the relationship of judge to criminal, for he is not worthy of judgment. He is a “no-person”! Thus, “the way of that wicked one will perish”!

**Mark 9:30-37** is the second of three passion predictions made by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (the other two being Mark 8:27-38 and 10:32-45). This prediction has a slightly different twist than the previous one, which concentrated upon the inevitable result of the resistance that Jesus’ new order was called to make against political, economic and religious oppression. In this passion prophecy, emphasis is upon the new social order itself, built around being a “servant of all”.

In this passage, Jesus once again tells his disciples that “the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hand, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (9:31). But the disciples do not know how to process these words, and therefore choose to ignore them. Rather, they argue among themselves as to which of them is to become the greatest.

Jesus calls the disciples to account for their argument, and thus their total lack of understanding of the model of society as God meant it to be. For the first time, he says to them what would become an oft-repeated statement in the gospels, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35b; cf. 10:43-44; Matt. 20:26-27; 23:11; Luke 22:26). He then places a child in their midst and makes an example of him, stating, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (9:37).

What Jesus is presenting in this second passion prediction is his understanding of the composition of power. Power can be defined as the capacity, ability and willingness to act. But there are two primary ways such capacity, ability and willingness can be exercised – unilaterally or relationally.

*Unilateral power* is power that comes from the “top down”. It is power that is understood as command and control, in which people are ordered what to do. That ordering might be done nicely and with the appearance of voluntary response (a master saying to a slave, “Will you please do such-and-such for me?”) but response is in reality not optional. Although people can (and often do) act unilaterally in their exercise of power, such power is primarily expressed by institutions and those institutions’ capacity to create and adjudicate laws, use military power, control wealth or act symbolically.

Unilateral power is essentially “power over” a people. There are two types of unilateral power. *Dominating power* is one of these. This is the power exercised by a government or group through the force of guns and physical intimidation. It is the tyrannical use of power – colonial, plantation, paternalistic power. This was the power Jesus described in today’s Gospel lesson, when he said, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him”. The “human hands” Jesus was talking about was the Jewish high priest, the Sanhedrin (or Temple) court and Pilate, Roman procurator of Judea. Behind Caiaphas, Annas and Pilate stood both

Rome and the Jewish political/economic/religious systems designed to control the people and use them for those systems' ends. This was dominating unilateral power at its worst.

A second form of unilateral power is *constitutional power*. This is a more sophisticated and much more subtle form of power than dominating power. But it is still essentially unilateral in nature. Constitutional power is power over people as defined by the law rather than defined by force. It tends to be highly structured and hierarchal, with responsibility being delegated by the people to those who hold power. This was the kind of power used by Pilate in his actual trial of Jesus, as he used his granted powers under the laws of Rome to condemn Jesus to death.

Under constitutional power, those in power theoretically rule by the consent of the governed and thus are responsible for representing the governed. But, in reality, the governed play little role in the operation or influence of the government. Thus, in the United States, the people's responsibility is to vote upon the selection of representatives and to write letters of protest or telephone their protest. That is what people assume is the limits of participation by the people in the decision-making process.

The other essential type of power is *relational power*. Whereas unilateral power is "power over" a constituency, relational power is "power with". Relational power is essentially the power of the people, however that might be organized. It might be organized through the ongoing institutions directly accountable to the people (churches, clubs, "town meetings") or through informal and temporary gatherings (task forces, committees, community groups). But it is primarily power that is built upon the people.

There are two types of relational power, as well. The first is *mutual power*. Mutual power exists whenever two people or groups hold fairly equal power. But rather than trying to enhance their own power at the expense of the other party, mutual power will respect each other's power and position, working together for common objectives. A clear biblical example of mutual relational power was found in the relationship between David and Jonathan. Jonathan had power as the son of the king. David's power was based upon his military acumen and popularity. Both men could have identified each other as rivals for the throne, and thus acted destructively toward each other. Instead, because they loved each other, they used their mutual power to both strengthen and secure Israel and to protect each other.

The second type of relational power is *reciprocal power*. Reciprocal power is shared power, in which each party is of equal strength, is equally participative in the decision-making process and each commits itself not to its private or exclusive good but to the common good. It is power that people build together for the common good. If power is the ability to get things done, relational power is the capacity to organize people around common values, relationships and issues so that they can bring about the change they desire.<sup>1</sup>

In the Gospel Lesson for the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus is presenting to his disciples an alternative community to that which they have experienced all of their lives. The only exercise of power they have ever known has been unilateral power, as exercised by the synagogue, the

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Robert Linthicum, *Building A People of Power* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Books, 2006), pp. 99-101. This entire book deals with a theology and practice of relational power.

Temple, the Jewish economic system, the king and Rome. It has all been “top-down”, “command-and-control” that dominated and used them and all of society around them. Their embarrassing argument regarding which of them was the greatest demonstrated their unconscious acceptance of unilateral power as the only legitimate way to build society.

But Jesus showed them another way! Jesus taught them that the kingdom of God cannot be built on the exercise of power that insists one be greater than the others! Instead, such an exercise of unilateral power will destroy even the beginnings of God’s kingdom. Thus, by placing a child in their midst and using that child to teach them about the exercise of an entirely different power, Jesus was presenting to the disciples a clear alternative to unilateral power. He was presenting to them a picture of what public life was meant by God to be, life lived in loving and transformative relationships with each other – the “kingdom of God” Jesus had come to create.

One cannot appreciate the importance of the symbolic move Jesus made by placing a child in the disciples’ midst unless one understands the honor-driven society of Jesus’ time. In first-century Israel, status in society was determined by the honor you were accorded in that society, not by your economic, political or religious power. That is, fame and greatness were judged by your place in the hierarchy of life to which all Israelites held, and thus with whom you associated – not by your wealth or position. For example, even the poorest rabbi would be held in far higher esteem than a wealthy businessman or priest, no matter their power or wealth or the degree of that rabbi’s poverty. And the reason why that rabbi would be held in such high esteem was because that rabbi was the revered teacher of the people.

At the very bottom of the prestige heap would have been lepers, shepherds and children. Such people would be seen as possessing the least honor, and therefore for you to be seen continuously in their presence would not only diminish your status; it would actually “drain” you of honor.

Thus, for Jesus to put a child in the midst of the disciples and to tell them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” was for Jesus to present to his followers a radically different way of understanding society. Jesus is living out before them his dictum that the first must be last and servant of all (vs. 35). By placing a child in the center of the circle, and placing himself before the child (almost as a supplicant), Jesus is lowering himself beyond any cultural acceptance. He is a rabbi – and not just a rabbi of a local congregation, but a rabbi of national reputation. And here, he is seeking both to be the servant of a child and welcoming that child into the church – the gathering of his disciples. This is a demonstration of the most radical relational power. And it is an overwhelming lesson to his disciples of Jesus’ priorities both for the kingdom of God and for their life together as God’s shalom community!

**James 3:13-4:8.** In 3:13-18, James contrasts the wisdom of the world and Godly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is characterized by envy and selfish ambition resulting in disorder and wickedness “of every kind” (3:14-15). But Godly wisdom is characterized as pure, peaceable, gentle, “full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (vs. 17). The

results of acting out of such wisdom is personal righteousness,<sup>2</sup> public justice and the building of the shalom community (vs. 18).

In this passage, Jesus is contrasting and comparing two types of wisdom – earthly and godly. In doing so, he is coming at the topic from the perspective of Proverbs – that wisdom is not the accumulation, evaluation and use of information or knowledge. Rather, it is “right doing”; it is God-infused knowledge that is acted out and thus demonstrated as authentic through one’s actions of justice and righteousness.

James likely felt the necessity to make this differentiation because of a growing trend he saw occurring in the church of his time. Several of the pagan religions within the Roman Empire perceived themselves as having a “wisdom” or exclusive knowledge that those not of those religions did not possess. This was particularly true of several Egyptian and Persian religions, as well as Hellenistic philosophy and astrology.

Many Christians were attracted to this pagan idea that they might possess a knowledge or “wisdom” the pagans and other Christians might not have. Obviously, these Christians didn’t embrace the “wisdom” or beliefs of these Egyptian and Persian religions or Hellenist philosophy or astrology. But they did embrace the idea that they possessed both information and knowledge about Jesus, God and the world that was excluded from others.

This movement in the church was what James was reacting against when he wrote chapters three and four of the Epistle of James. His hope was that his opposition to this belief of some Christians possessing secret knowledge would eliminate this trend in the midst of the church. But he was not successful in stopping that trend. Instead, by the second century, that perspective had blossomed into a spectrum of movements that came to be known as Gnosticism (from the Greek *gnosis* – “to know”). By the third century, Gnosticism and orthodox Christianity battled for control of the church. By the fourth century, orthodox Christianity had won (primarily through the actions of the Councils). But Gnosticism, although beaten, never disappeared from the church; it has existed in every century of the church, even up to today (e.g., Christian Science, Mormonism, some forms of fundamentalism and cults).

Although the movement had many names derived from their respective teachers (e.g., Marcionites, Manichees, Valentinians), they all held to the common perspective that they held a special knowledge of God revealed only to the initiates through their relationship with Jesus Christ who came as a non-human (either angelic or demi-god) emissary of the supreme God, bringing with him the “gnosis” which only they had received and could understand.

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<sup>2</sup> The word “righteous” in the English language currently has the sense of freedom from guilt or sin, but that is actually a derivative from the Old English word that was much more comprehensive and consequently closer to the ancient Greek and Hebrew. The Greek (*dikaios*) and Hebrew (*tsedeq* or *tsaddiq*) words for “righteous” have a double meaning, consistent with each other. The Greek and Hebrew words both meant doing that which is morally or ethically right and acting out of an outraged sense of justice. Thus the word means both “righteousness” (that is, acting ethically) and “justice” (that is, just or fair dealing with people or institutions). Because the current understanding of “righteous” in English no longer contains the “justice” nuance of the Greek and Hebrew, we need to include both the words “righteousness” and “justice” in tandem (as we have done at this footnote in the text) in order to capture the intent of the person writing in Greek or Hebrew.

James' argument against the Gnostic tendencies he saw in the church was to define what was authentic Christian wisdom. As the acknowledged head of the Church (Acts 12:17; 15:1-21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9-11), James' word carried enormous weight. Therefore what he had to say about the "wisdom" of Christianity would be taken quite seriously as "official" church teaching by most Christians. Indeed it was – but not by the proto-Gnostics.

What James did in his epistle (3:13-4:8) was to define "wisdom", not as possessing private information or knowledge (he calls this "earthly wisdom" – 3:14-15), but of an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ that expresses itself in acts of justice, righteousness and building communities of shalom ("Godly wisdom" – 3:16-18). "Earthly wisdom" – that is perceiving yourself as somehow special because you possess restricted knowledge – inevitably leads to conflicts, disputes and competition between you and others. Eventually, it results in you adulterating the faith and destroying the faith of other Christians (which he calls "murder"), so that you end up "becoming an enemy of God" (4:1-5).

But "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (4:6, quoting Proverbs 3:34 and thus identifying his understanding of wisdom with that of Proverbs). So repent of your sin in perceiving yourselves as chosen vessels of God's hidden knowledge. "Draw near to God, cleanse your hands, purify your hearts" (4:8), and you will discover that God "will draw near to you" (4:8a). A repentant heart is the door to authentic Godly wisdom, not a privileged, proud and consequently excluding attitude!

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