



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Words or Wisdom? Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

The first title I jotted down for today's sermon was "Words of Wisdom." I was thinking about two verses of scripture. The first verse, from the prophesy of Isaiah, is an offering of praise: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (Isaiah 50:4). In striking contrast, the second verse, from the Epistle of James, cautions us, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1). As is often the case, scripture holds its truths in tension, forcing us to think carefully about who we are and what we are called to do.

Teachers are a special breed of people and it is true—not many of us should take on that calling for it requires special talents and skills. I honor anyone who is called to teach. The best teachers always have something important and memorable to say, not only about their particular subject, but about life in general. They offer us words of wisdom and, when they speak, we listen. Socrates said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." Ghandi taught us that "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind" and reminded us that "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Albert Einstein surprised us by saying that "The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination." And Plato warned us that "Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something." Words like these resonate with all of humanity. We should listen.

There are other words of wisdom which resonate, but in a humorous way. Comedian Morey Amsterdam said "People who live in glass houses might as well answer the door." Milton Berle suggested that "If at first you don't succeed, I'd stay away from skydiving." And Herb Caen observed that "A man begins cutting his wisdom teeth the first time he bites off more than

he can chew.”¹ We appreciate the words of wisdom offered to us by others and are wise if we heed what they have learned.

Wisdom covers a broad spectrum of information—at least from a faith perspective. The Wisdom Writings of the Old Testament include the Book of Psalms which are prayers and songs, Ecclesiastes which ponders the meaning of life and urges us to enjoy living, The Song of Solomon which is a collection of poems celebrating human love, Job which is an exploration of injustice, suffering, and faith, and the Book of Proverbs which is a mini-library² of practical teachings on morality, virtue, common sense, and growing up.

As we heard from the passage read earlier in the service, wisdom is often portrayed in scripture as a woman. I think it was itself a wise choice because, based on personal experience, women tend to use better judgement, take fewer risks, and end up in the Emergency Room far less than men! Women often seem to be naturally wise.

Three men wanted to cross a river. They had no idea how to cross it, so one man knelt down on his knees and prayed "Lord give me the power and strength to cross the river." Suddenly the man became very strong and swam across the river. The next man thought: if it worked for him, it'll work for me. So he knelt down and prayed "Lord give me the skills and the strength to cross the river." The man built a canoe and paddled himself across the river. The last man thought: if it worked for both of them, I know it'll work for me. So he also knelt down and prayed "Lord give me the wisdom and knowledge to cross the river." He turned into a woman and walked across the bridge.

The female figure who opens the doorway to wisdom in the Book of Proverbs is something of a stereotypical teacher. She has a bit of a hard edge. She has no trouble saying, "I told you so!" She taunts the people who will not listen to her. She scoffs. She reproves. In his paraphrase of the Book of Proverbs, Eugene Peterson imagines Lady Wisdom warning:

¹Cited in Gene Perret and Terry Perret Martin, *Classic One-Liners*, (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), 81, 77.

²R.B.Y. Scott, "Introduction to The Proverbs," *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Expanded Edition, Revised Standard Version*, Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 769.

“Simpletons! How long will you wallow in ignorance?
Cynics! How long will you feed your cynicism?
Idiots! How long will you refuse to learn?
About face! I can revise your life.
Look, I’m ready to pour out my spirit on you;
I’m ready to tell you all I know.
As it is, I’ve called, but you’ve turned a deaf ear;
I’ve reached out to you, but you’ve ignored me.
“Since you laugh at my counsel
and make a joke of my advice,
How can I take you seriously?
I’ll turn the tables and joke about your troubles!
What if the roof falls in,
and your whole life goes to pieces?
What if catastrophe strikes and there’s nothing
to show for your life but rubble and ashes?
You’ll need me then. You’ll call for me, but don’t expect
an answer.
No matter how hard you look, you won’t find me.”³

Proverbs 1:22-28

Did you ever have a teacher like that? The Book of Proverbs is a teaching tool. It was essentially a primer for young men, a collection of commonsense sayings for adults, and a guide to direct us throughout life.

These pithy, memorable sayings of the Book of Proverbs and similar writings are helpful—and they are generally “wise.” They certainly contain truth. They are words of wisdom, but being wise is about how we use these words—and all words. The truth is that while there are certain people who are called to teach in the classroom, we are all called to teach by our lives. The writer of the Epistle of James understood that and that is why we are cautioned about our ability to teach.

The writer of James was a different kind of teacher from the strict lecturer we find in Proverbs. He is intuitive and engaging and creative. He comes at wisdom differently. He states the obvious but pulls his students into the middle of the issue. He reminds me of my sixth grade English teacher who always had us doing creative projects to learn grammar. I have never forgotten her simple lesson on prepositions. A preposition, she said, is

³*The Message* (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson.

anything an airplane can do to a cloud. An airplane can go in, out, around, above, below, and through a cloud. James also draws pictures to describe what he is teaching. Listen to what he wrote to Christians in the third quarter of the first century:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

James 3:1-12

James is not passing on words of wisdom. He is urging us to choose between words or wisdom. He recognized what power words can have—power to curse or bless, power to wound or heal, power to oppress or liberate. James likened the tongue to a bit which when placed in the mouth of a horse enables the animal to be controlled with a bridle. He likens the tongue to the rudder of a ship which, though small, steers the enormous vessel wherever the pilot wishes. He warns that the tongue is like a small fire which, uncontrolled, can cause enormous devastation. Just ask Mrs. O’Leary’s cow what happened when she kicked over that lantern and burned most of Chicago! The tongue is powerful because of the words we can speak.

I have been thinking about these warnings from James because we are hearing a lot of words these days. We are into political campaigning and so many words are being spoken. Some of them are insightful, intriguing words, but so many of them are irresponsible, volatile, accusatory, inflammatory, reactionary, insensitive, untrue, and downright dull. We hear words spoken between young black men and white policemen and some of those words are angry, disrespectful, impatient, and violent on both sides. We hear cruel and misinformed words that are spoken about people we perceive to be different all the while forgetting that we are also considered “different” by other people. We hear, and sometimes say, words of hatred and misunderstanding and ignorance.

Years ago the English group The Bee Gees sang a song about the power of words. It is a song that James would have appreciated:

I started a joke, which started the whole world crying,
but I didn't see that the joke was on me, oh no.
I started to cry, which started the whole world laughing,
oh, if I'd only seen that the joke was on me.
I looked at the skies, running my hands over my eyes,
and I fell out of bed, hurting my head from things that I'd said.
'Til I finally died, which started the whole world living,
oh, if I'd only seen that the joke was on me.⁴

We hear and speak so many words these days. Newspapers, magazines, cable channels, radio, Facebook, Twitter and other social media send our words around the world in moments. And James reminds us that those words might well start a firestorm that can wreak havoc around the world . . . or with the person across the table. Words or wisdom? Words can help or harm. Wisdom about the words we use will always help. Which will we choose?

I had the privilege of celebrating the marriage of one of our nieces last weekend. As part of their marriage ceremony, my niece and her fiancé each wrote a letter to the other expressing why they had fallen in love. My niece pointed out her soon-to-be husband's kindness, his passion for healthy habits, his love of the outdoors, and his orderliness as reasons for her love. Then she dove deeper and noted that he possessed something she had long

⁴Jose de Almeida Cirino, Maurice Ernest Gibb, Robin Hugh Gibb, Jose Carlos da Silva, and Barry Gibb, “I Started a Joke,” 1968, Copyright: Crompton Songs, Universal Music Publishing Int. Mgb Ltd.

admired in her father: a slowness to speak. She shared with him her gratitude for the fact that whenever they disagreed, he carefully chose his words, demonstrating his love and respect for her. This young man chooses wisdom over words.

Every day we hear a lot of words. Some of them are wise, some are coarse, hurtful, and dangerous. Every day we say a lot of words. James reminds us to think before we speak, to choose our words carefully, to be wise in speaking. A few years ago I read that children were asked to define love. One little fellow said, "Love is when you know your name is safe in someone else's mouth." I believe it was Jesus who reminded us of the ancient wisdom that we should "love our neighbor as our self." Choose wisdom over words. Choose gentle words and all of your words will be spoken in love.

September 13, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Heart of our heart, True Wisdom, and Lord of all, with gratitude that is deeper than the ocean's floor and praise that is higher than the stars which shine light on your creation, we bow before you now. You know us better than we know ourselves and love us better than we love ourselves, so we are completely open before you.

You have heard the concerns of this community of faith. The people whom we have named are already under your care and we are grateful. Move to meet their particular needs, we pray. Make yourself known to them and surround them with your goodness and grace.

Hear now our own concerns which are whispered in the depths of our souls. You alone, O God, know our greatest needs. You alone understand our largest fears and our tiniest hopes. You alone have the ability to answer our prayers in ways that are best for us. Answer, O God, and help us, we pray.

You also know those things which bring us the greatest joy in life. We thank you for these blessings and ask that you keep them near to us that we might always balance our sorrow with our joy. Fill our lives with the graces of life, we pray, that your delight might be our joy as well.

We rejoice with our sister congregations in the persons you have brought into their lives to minister with them. Grant them a vision of where you want them to go. Give them the energy and resources to move along that path. And fill them with passion and peace for the journey.

When we grieve, O God, comfort us. When we despair, lift our spirits. When we do wrong, turn us around. And when we place our trust in you, surround us with your Spirit and protect us with your love for our hope rests secure in you. All these things we ask in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.