

“Are You Listening?”

Sermon – September 15, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

I’ve always thought I was a pretty good husband and my wife, Helen, agrees. In fact, she says I only have two faults: that I don't listen and something else.

I’m joking, of course—I have many more faults than two.

Today’s lectionary has a lot to say about listening—and speaking.

We continue this month in the Old Testament from the book of Proverbs.

Chapters 1–9 and 31 bookend the older material in between and provide a framework for the book overall, which was completed after the Exile in the 6th century BCE.

At this time, of course, the community’s foundations of kingship and the temple had been destroyed; questions of identity and how to rebuild or reclaim that community were prominent.

Some held tightly to the idea of rebuilding the temple and focused on exclusivity as a means of preserving the community—something we see with the Pharisees in Jesus’ time.

Others clung to the idea of kingship and developed the hope for a new king who would rescue the people from their imperial subjugation—as today’s Gospel lesson implies about the people’s expectations for the messiah.

Still others sought to frame community around sets of instructions that were dependent on morality and obedience—hence wisdom literature like the book of Proverbs.

Today’s passage with Wisdom out on city square speaking out like a storefront preacher. Explained further in chapters 3 and 8, wisdom is personified as a woman and as a partner with God and being present at creation.

Importantly, though, she is not a goddess. She is human, a mediator between the human and divine, and she enhances the theological value of the human experience and of human wisdom. Much later Christians will often identify her with the Holy Spirit.

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The Common English Bible translation captures the, uh, “spirit” of Woman Wisdom’s exhortation in today’s passage with, “How long will you clueless people love your naiveté, mockers hold their mocking dear, and fools hate knowledge?”

She goes on to say, essentially, “Talking to you is like talking to a wall. So, when things go bad—and they will go bad—I’ll say, ‘I told you so.’ And don’t come crying to me—that’ll be too late.”

Pretty harsh attitude. But the structure of the passage makes it clear that Woman Wisdom’s attitude is actually caused by the foolishness of the fools. She’s upset because she sees what fools are going to do, she tries to tell them and they don’t listen and so she has to watch in frustration.

Those of you who are parents probably have experienced similar things—as your parents did of you. And in today’s hypercharged political atmosphere, you may feel similarly about people on the other side of the political divide from you.

So how do you know if you are wise or foolish? As Shakespeare said in the play, “As You Like It”, “A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.”

As verse 29 implies, wisdom starts by choosing to fear the LORD. And by fear we mean awe and respect and wanting to please God. It means recognizing that everything starts and ends with God. God is the creator but as importantly he continues as the guider and sustainer. In return, Woman Wisdom tells us we need to live responsibly under God.

Later in Proverbs we hear that means practicing friendship and neighborliness; being humble; being a good spouse and parent; helping the poor, the widow, the orphan both as an individual and for those in government.

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We are to participate in the pattern of the natural world, making choices to benefit the whole, not merely securing our own advantages.

These are the wise things to do. And we should listen because a rejection of wisdom is the same as the rejection of the LORD and of God’s ways.

On a comforting note, today’s passage ends with verse 33, “but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

That’s nice to hear—but you might be skeptical. I think many or even most people have a dread of disaster come Election Day, regardless of the outcome.

The way to think about it, though, is that if you truly trust in the LORD, you can be at ease no matter what comes. As people of faith, we live in the conviction that—eventually—God’s reign will come on earth as it is already in heaven.

These days with all our constant stream of multimedia—TV, radio, internet—we have many voices shouting and not a lot of wisdom among them. In fact, much of it is hurtful and hateful, seeking to divide and condemn rather than building up and encourage.

The Epistle of James has something to say about that. Like Proverbs for the Old Testament, this month’s epistle lessons all come from James. And, like Proverbs, James is more like wisdom literature than “gospel”, which is why Martin Luther distained it.

But if he were alive to today, I think he would say, “If I had known how foolish people would become, I would have given James a break.”

Today’s passage from the beginning of chapter 3 is timely and apropos. We often contrast the head and the heart in our faith. The intellectual balanced against the emotional. But in between the head and heart is a stumbling block lurking in the shadows: the tongue. You might summarize today’s passage as “the taming—or not—of the tongue.”

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Specifically, James is discussing the tongue of teachers in the church—like me.

In fact, in our Book of Order, Ministers of Word and Sacrament are also called Teaching Elders.

And while ministers bear a greater weight because of their position, really any of you that teach—Sunday School, Bible study, liturgist—have a responsibility to be, uh, responsible in what you say, that is teach.

James says, though, that most of us should not be teacher because what teachers say has great impact, so if you say the wrong thing it isn't just about you being wrong; it's about you leading others in the wrong direction as well.

It is for this reason that taking on the role of teacher should be weighed carefully. Those who teach are partly responsible for cultivating the moral life—and therefore, according to James, the outward actions—of those who learn from them.

Other New Testament letters caution against false teachers, likening them to false prophets, but here James raises the bar. He is cautioning about people who are sincere about being a teacher but who speak wrongly and therefore dangerously.

In fact, James says we basically can't help ourselves. As he says in verse 8, “No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” That is, try as we might, our tongue will inevitably screw things up. “The tongue is a fire”, he says, and “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!”

Certainly, we see this in the secular world. Again, most obviously in the political realm and how the tongue has caused great harm when spoken with fearmongering.

But this is even more true for Christian leaders and pastors, particularly when they have a large public forum.

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To be called to preach is to play with fire: Holy Spirit fire and the sort of unholy fire James speaks of here. And I think about that every week when I’m preparing my sermon as well as speaking in public and posting on social media. Words matter.

As Woman Wisdom would say, “Only the wise should teach.” And the number one quality of wisdom is the capacity to acknowledge the fundamental reality that all of creation is dependent upon the gifts of God’s grace and mercy.

Among God’s gifts to humans is the ability to participate in that word, both through its power to create and sustain human community, and its ability to speak God’s word of promise to one another

Speaking wisely requires being able to listen. Listening for the needs of others. Listening with empathy with those we don’t agree with. Listen for the word of God in the still silence.

Our American society hasn’t the faintest idea how to listen. So much of American Christianity is a shouting match. Foolishness abides. Fires are set, and what is the cost?

We are invited to acknowledge that in God’s continuing gifts of creation, in even the use of the smallest of endowments, like the tongue, in the power of words and communication, there resides also that power through which God working through us can change both ourselves and the world around us.

That is our cross to bear—and I don’t mean as an idiom, but as from today’s Gospel lesson in Mark. Being a follower of Jesus means being an outspoken advocate of peace and reconciliation even as we might suffer ridicule and attacks for that. But as Woman Wisdom say, “those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.