

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2015

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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."

This is the Word of the Lord, **thanks be to God!**

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."

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, you are our rock, our redeemer. Amen.

As I was thinking about today's sermon, I began to see an outline around the three paragraphs of our gospel lesson: Who do we say Jesus is, what are our minds set on, and have we denied ourselves, taken up our crosses, and followed Jesus yet?

Of course, each of these questions could result in a sermon in their own right, but there is one really important thing that ties each of these questions together: the way we act towards others answers the questions!

How we act towards others tells the world who we say Jesus is. How we act towards others tells the world what our minds are set on. How we act towards others tells the world if we have learned to deny ourselves, take up our own cross, and follow Jesus or not.

The science of Psychology is based on just a few basic principles: behavior is measurable, observable, and predictable. Most of us live our lives only slightly aware of how our behavior affects others. We know we have an impact on our family members, on those we work with, on those we come in contact with in the community. We also know that those around us have an impact on us. We may have an understanding of the relationship between a bad day and the argument we just had with a loved one, or the loved one's anxiety and the tension we feel inside, but for the most part, we live our lives, day in and day out, mostly inside ourselves, rarely spending much energy thinking about what our behavior tells the world about ourselves.

Today's scripture reminds us that it is important to understand what our behavior tells the world about us, and about our faith.

For example, how would someone act if they thought Jesus is the Messiah? They might use the stories about Jesus in the bible as a guide for their own

behavior: helping people in need, sharing resources with those who have little, listening to all, even if society says not to...

So what would you think a person is saying about who Jesus is if they ridicule people in need? If they blame a person for their circumstances, if they refuse to help a person because of their skin color, or other characteristic? What are they saying about who Jesus is when a person is denied basic human rights?

Behavior is measurable, observable, and predictable. Behavior that is inconsistent with what Jesus teaches us in the bible is measurable, observable, and yes, predictable. Mean-spirited behavior aimed at the helpless and the hopeless tells us that the person doesn't believe that Jesus is the Messiah. And believing that Jesus is anything other than the Messiah isn't Christianity!

What might be the difference in our behavior if our minds are set on human things instead of divine things? For Peter, it was being selfish enough to want Jesus to live and not fulfill scripture. What about for us? For me, divine behavior means caring for others first. We all know people who put others first. Their behavior tells us that they have their minds on divine things. Of course, we all have our minds on human things: we have bills to pay, obligations to fulfill, but if all we ever think about is ourselves, and meeting our own needs, our behavior will tell the world that truth.

Thinking about divine things means finding ways to put others, and their needs, ahead of our own.

That leads us to the third and final paragraph, where Jesus tells the disciples that if they wish to be his followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

We don't have to be trained detectives to observe the people around us and figure out who has denied themselves and taken up their cross to follow Jesus, and who has not. I probably don't even have to give you examples: we all can practice observing others, and interpreting how their behavior

tells us what they believe. Shockingly, human beings are far more transparent than we want to believe.

So here is the good news, and I know you were starting to think there might not be any good news in this message, but I assure you, it's here, and it's very good news indeed: even if our behavior for the last 50 years indicates that we don't believe Jesus is the Messiah, that our minds are set on human things, and that we haven't denied ourselves, taken up our cross, and followed Jesus, we can do all those things starting today!

Right now, right this very moment, we can begin acting in ways that tell the world how we believe. Right now, right this very moment, we can observe a whole lot of people who will tell us they are so very Christian, that their faith is the foundation of their very being, and in the next breath tell us why thousands of undocumented immigrants should be deported to an almost certain death.

We can act. We can set our minds on divine things, doing the divine work God calls us to do, we can deny ourselves, and take up our crosses in order to follow Jesus. And we can start expecting those who tells us they are faithful to start acting like it!

If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then his behavior becomes the template or example for our behavior. If we have our minds on divine things, and not on human things, then our behavior becomes a sign of what we believe. If we deny ourselves, put others first, take up our own crosses, and follow Jesus, then our behavior will be the evidence that others can use to measure and predict what we will do based on our faith.

I'm not talking about a group of us going out and selling all our possessions and giving the proceeds to a charity that helps the needy, (although that was one example Jesus suggested to a wealthy follower), I'm only saying that if we start paying attention to the relationship between what we believe and how we act, and if we can make some small changes that will cause them to be more in harmony, then we can change the world.

This is not a challenge for our Atheist, Agnostic, or non-Christian sisters and brothers: this is a challenge for those of us who call ourselves Christian, followers of Christ. Other faiths and belief systems have their own way of showing what they believe by how they act. But since we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, there are certain foundational behaviors that come with that belief: today is the day we start paying attention to the relationship between what we believe and how we behave. And each and every day from now on, we get to choose whether we act as if we believe that Jesus is the Messiah or not. Each and every day from now on, we get to act as if our minds are on divine things or human things. Each and every day from now on, we get to act like we have denied ourselves, taken up our crosses, and followed Jesus, or not.

And, should we stumble, or make a mistake, should our behavior be obviously out of sync with what we profess is our faith, if we ask for forgiveness, the Messiah, the one with his mind on divine things, the one who denied himself, took up his cross and sacrificed his very life for us, will remind us that we are forgiven because of his sacrifices.

Today, I'm asking each of us to take some time to evaluate what our behavior towards others says about what we believe. And, if we discover that our behavior towards others is not consistent with what we believe, then the good news is that it's never too late to start changing our behavior! If we discover that our behavior is consistent with what we believe, then let's keep doing it!

The world can only become a better place when we work to make our behavior more consistent with our faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.