

“Wisdom”
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Sunday, July 3, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Do you remember the comic strip, “B.C.?” There’s a great character in that strip. The guru. The guru sits on top of his mountain and gives outrageous advice to whoever comes to see him.

On one occasion, one of the cavemen makes the difficult and dangerous trek up the mountain and asks, “What, great guru, is the meaning of life?” The guru replies, “Get me down off this mountain, and maybe I can figure it out!”

In our search for wisdom – and we could all benefit from greater wisdom! -- we can end up spending all our time on the mountain thinking lofty thoughts about God until we’re unable or unwilling to come down. Wisdom is sought partially on the mountain but mostly in the day to day details of living.

Jesus talks about wisdom in today’s reading from the gospel of Matthew. He says, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” Let’s see what we might learn from Him.

I. The Parable of the Children (vv. 16-19)

In verses 16-19, Jesus uses the parable of the children in the marketplace. He confuses the roles of men and women, and he confuses the roles of young and old.

Jesus refers to children sitting in the marketplace. Children don’t sit in the marketplace. They run about, laughing and playing. They are too full of energy to sit and call to one another. This is what adults do. We can guess, then, that Jesus is perhaps talking about adults who behave like children.

Jesus talks about dancing and flute-playing. These are behaviors for men in Jesus' day. Dancing and flute-playing are distinctly male forms of celebration at weddings.

Wailing and mourning, on the other hand, are reserved for women at funerals. Women are the official – and often, professional -- mourners of the day.

Children would play at dancing and flute-playing and wailing and mourning. They would play pretend -- running and laughing and teasing and playing at being adults.

Jesus makes a point about the lack of wisdom in “this generation” – the generation of his day. He could make the same point about our generation, as well. Wisdom is sorely lacking.

We might expect to find wisdom increasing with years. But Jesus says the adults of his day are acting like children. We only need open a newspaper or look at TV or online news to see lack of wisdom everywhere today. Scandals abound, among politicians, religious leaders, educators, corporate executives, and the list goes on.

We may harbor a secret hope that our leaders are wise. We might carry a secret expectation that the older one gets, the wiser one becomes. Clearly, our hopes and our expectations do not always play out in reality.

Jesus chastises his generation for ridiculing an imprisoned John the Baptist. They behave like children, when serious matters are at stake. Earlier, in verse 2, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” As we know, John will lose his life in prison. Facing death, his foremost question is whether or not Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

John understands the seriousness of the times. His generation – Jesus' generation – does not share this understanding. John has wisdom. The people of “this generation” – Jesus' contemporaries -- are lacking in wisdom. They say John “has a demon” because he fasts. They

say Jesus is “a glutton and a drunkard” because he befriends tax collectors and sinners. There is no pleasing these people! These children. All Jesus can say is that, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

II. Childlike faith (vv. 25-27)

Jesus switches gears in verses 25 and 26, thanking God that the secret of wisdom is revealed to “infants,” to the “little ones” of the world rather than to the wise and the intelligent. Jesus here commends his followers for their childlike faith.

This contrasts with the world’s expectations. Jesus’ audience would expect wisdom to be found in those who have authority and power in the world. Such people might include religious leaders such as the Scribes and the Pharisees.

But God’s way is to reveal the secret of wisdom to the “little ones.” This term – “little ones” – refers specifically to the poor and the powerless. These are the little ones of whom Jesus speaks.

Then, in verse 27, Jesus speaks of his relationship with God. No one knows Jesus except God and no one know God except Jesus and anyone to whom Jesus reveals Him. The style of this verse is taken from Jewish wisdom literature. Its meaning is that Jesus is the eternal Wisdom of God, the Logos. Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom in human form.

The meaning of wisdom is to know and to do God’s will. Jesus tells us that God’s will is for us to live the law of love. Throughout the gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches about love: in chapter 5, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you;” in chapter 7, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets;” in chapter 9, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners;” in chapter 22, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is

the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets;” and in chapter 25, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

So, in verse 27 Jesus explains his relationship to God in the language of divine wisdom.

Jesus presents himself as the wisdom of God.

John Catoir writes in his book, The Power of Faith, about a new perspective in the search for God and God’s wisdom:

“A priest friend of mine went to the missions in Africa. It took him three years to learn Swahili. He was working in a small village when he could finally communicate to his community. They understood him, but one of the men came up to him afterwards and said, ‘Father, we thank you for all the sacrifices you’ve made to preach to us in Swahili, but you don’t understand God the way we do. You speak of God as out there in the universe, but for us God is like a tiger and we are the prey. Not only does He hunt us down, but we are already captured by him and baptism puts the seal on this capture. We are held by Him and He owns us, so there isn’t any great difficulty in reaching him. He is the one who seizes us.’

“The priest learned more from that man, the native, than he probably learned in the seminary. It’s just a way of looking at God which is more meaningful in some ways than some kind of a vague, distant God in whom you have faith. We are owned by God. Once you have the faith to know that the Lord will sustain you and keep you and hold you and protect you, you don’t have to worry. Faith then becomes the support of your life.”

III. The yoke of wisdom (vv. 28-30)

Jesus continues, in verses 28-30, where he offers rest for the heavy laden. Jesus isn't talking here to people who are weighed down with the burdens of everyday living. He is talking to religious people, people who are trying very hard to find wisdom.

These are people who struggle with how to discover the will of God. And when they believe they know the will of God for a particular situation, they struggle with their inability to do it.

Jesus says to these religious people: The little ones know my secret of wisdom. They know that the will of God is found in visiting the sick and in preaching good news to the poor. They know that my yoke has to do with the commitment to love. It is a yoke that I, myself, wear with you. We are a team, you and I, yoked together by the commandment of love.

Jesus does not intend for his yoke to be easy in the sense of being less demanding. In fact, the term used for "easy" really means "well-fitting." The sense is this: When a team of oxen is yoked together, they work better if their yoke fits them well. "Well-fitting." "Easy."

Throughout his teaching, and particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demands much of us with his ethic of love. The passages I quoted a few moments ago attest to this.

The easiness and lightness that Jesus promises are simplicity in terms of understanding God's wisdom.

The intelligentsia of Jesus' time have made the search for wisdom a difficult task. Their ethical rules for living have become a great burden for people rather than an expression of their love for God and neighbor. Few have the means to fulfill the rules laid on them by the religious leaders of the day.

Jesus' ethic of love interprets the law and the prophets in an easy, simple manner that anyone can follow, if they choose to do so. He makes the understanding of the will of God easy for the common people, but he still maintains the highest standards for the lifestyles of his followers.

Another great old comic strip is Calvin and Hobbes.

In one installment, Calvin – you remember Calvin; that crazy 8-year-old boy with a tiger for an imaginary friend – Calvin is entering the house, all covered in dirt and grime. His mother cries, “You get into that tub, right now!”

Next frame, Calvin is seated in the bathtub – fully clothed.

He says, “I keep to the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law.”

The final frame has the mother yelling, “Calvin!” and Calvin leaping from the tub -- in trouble once again.

Jesus calls us to fulfill the spirit of the law, which in many ways is much more demanding than the letter of the law.

How are we to discover for ourselves the wisdom to know and to do God's will in specific situations?

Closing.

We begin by cultivating the desire to know and to do God's will. Jesus gives us two ways to do this; one is to pray for this desire, the other is to seek it among the poor and the powerless, -- “the little ones.”

The more we pray, the more we are led by God to be with the sick, the lonely, and the forgotten. The more we spend time with such folks, the more we find that we are drawn into the

life of prayer. And as we continue this cycle of prayer and action, we find that God's will for our lives becomes clearer, moment by moment.

God is the only way to wisdom. This is the biblical witness.

Jesus shows himself to be the incarnation of God's wisdom. Jesus also shows us that prayer and action are two ways we can seek wisdom in the midst of our daily living.

Jesus calls us to take up his yoke of love and follow.

If this sounds too much like an additional burden in our lives, we only need to remember that we do not carry it alone. Jesus walks with each one of us. When we choose to walk with Him – on a daily basis -- He gives us the strength and the courage we need to follow His path.

May you take the yoke of His wisdom upon you, and learn from Him the way you are to go.

Amen.