



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, August 19, 2018

Proper 15

Proverbs 9:1-6 | Psalm 34:9-14 | Ephesians 5:15-20 | John 6:51-58

FR. ALAN GIBSON

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are some things in life that are just a given: Always get it in writing. Never open an e-mail attachment from an address you don't know. Beware a preacher who talks about wisdom. The reasons are obvious: no one likes getting conned. Yet in choosing today's lessons, it seems the Church wants to turn our attention toward one of the more elusive virtues. So, now that you are forewarned about the pitfalls that lie before us, I would like to take on today's subject: Holy Wisdom.

The book of Proverbs, the foundational text of all biblical Wisdom Literature, begins with the assertion, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom" (1:7). The 'fear' the author of Proverbs is talking about is not a reaction to something scary that leaves us shaking in a corner. 'Fear' in the Wisdom Tradition means a sense of reverence; an appreciation of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and always present; something we human beings are not. God is understood by the Wisdom writers as the greatest force there is, which no one can fully understand or escape. "Fear of the Lord" means admitting that there is something vastly larger and more important than ourselves. It means being humble, another elusive virtue. But for those who possess it, humility will eventually lead to wisdom. Or at least that is the claim made in Proverbs.

Reading through Proverbs, and today's psalm, Wisdom is presented as something more valuable than money, or power, or maybe even love. These writers assume that a person who first seeks Wisdom will find these other things, in their proper perspective, as well. But the real benefit of Wisdom is its ability to show us how to live as we are meant to: in union with God, even in a world that foolishly ignores God. The wise "seek the Lord and lack nothing that is good." The foolish, those who do not seek God, waste their lives chasing after things that may provide temporary pleasure or profit, but never give lasting peace.

Continuing in this line of thought, St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, is concerned that we not set ourselves up to be disappointed by the results of foolish behavior. What the unwise find to be important are only the passing things of this world whose pursuit consumes them. Paul urges caution so that we are not overtaken by things that won't survive. Instead, Paul wants our hearts to be filled by the song of God's

Spirit, to make us one with God. Which brings us back to Wisdom and how we use it in making choices in life. Paul's point, like that of the author of the Psalm and Proverbs, is that there is not much room for God when our hearts are overwhelmed with a desire for the things of this world.

Wisdom was the last thing most people heard coming from Jesus' mouth as he spoke of the bread of heaven and equated it with his flesh. This speech just gets stranger and more grotesque with each verse. More than any of the other evangelists, St. John exploits the shock value of Christ's teachings. Talk of eating flesh and drinking blood no doubt horrified Jesus' listeners. That was the point. While Jesus' words are appalling, they are the reality of his life and message. To be one with Christ we must take his very being into our selves.

It's all too easy to look to Jesus as an 'ideal,' or a 'moral system' to be followed, or as a way to make life a bit 'better.' Such an approach is little more than substituting good manners for a sacrificial faith. There's no getting around the fact of the man who gave his life to bring God into our lives. What happened on Calvary was not an ideal to which one can choose to adhere. It was a real, flesh and blood event that a material view of the world sees as insanity. A world that promotes worship of the self thinks that only a fool would sacrifice his life for some pious notion of the Divine, and only a bigger fool would follow him. Maybe so. Yet it is hard to make the case that all the suffering, and strife, and constant instability that fills our world are the by-products of smart choices, made by wise individuals. If wisdom is the goal, (and you have to admit that's always been a whopper of an 'if') then we have to look beyond ourselves with the intention of giving our selves, if we hope to find it.

A union with the all-encompassing God, in a culture where isolation runs rampant; a sense of unshakable peace, that overcomes a world that prefers to settle differences by building barriers and picking up guns; true fulfillment, in the midst of numerous forms of starvation -- these things, and so much more, can be ours when Christ lives in us and we in him.

Nearly three thousand years ago, the Psalmist sang:

"Come children, and listen to me;

I will teach you the fear of the Lord."

Perhaps true wisdom is knowing it is never too late, even for a preacher, to listen and learn.