

“Humility That Comes From Wisdom”

Legacy Sunday

Proverbs 31:10-31; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

September 23, 2018

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Legacy Sunday, September 23, 2018, dedicated to Mary Alice Kuhn who entered eternal life on Tuesday, September 18, to the honor of my friend and colleague, Pastor Mark Diemer, to my amazing mother Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens, and to the memory and honor of all the pastors and staff who have served First Church since 1852 and all who have counted themselves among the members of this congregation across 166 years of life together and always to the glory of God!

“Humility That Comes from Wisdom”

Proverbs 31:10-31; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

Allow me to reflect – for a minute – on a text that I won’t return to today. The text is Proverbs 31:10-31 (found on pages 4 or 11 in today’s book of worship). Proverbs is a collection of sayings that speak well of the wise and not so well of the foolish in this world. This extended passage speaks of the “good wife.” The 22 verses in Hebrew form a perfect alphabetical acrostic – so it is a beautiful word play – something you find often in Proverbs and other prayers/writings in Judaism. In fact, I saw this at work several

times in the prayers of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, on Wednesday of this past week.

However, in our 21st Century understanding of the place of women in our homes and in our society, this passage is packed with problems – and defines women in ways that cannot be condoned. This is not an acceptable way for us to synthesize the role of women in our homes or our society. We would be well advised to repack this passage back into its ancient historical context and leave it there for Biblical Historians to analyze.

But, in my mind, it is ashamed and astonishing that we have it in the Common Lectionary, the three-year cycle of scriptural readings we go through. To all, I say, I am sorry for giving it such a place in our liturgical readings at First Church in our denomination which celebrates the gifts of women in ministry and all of daily life. The danger of rolling this text out is that it then appears to reflect the whole of writings on women in the Hebrew scriptures. Not true at all. Shame on those who put this together. Proverbs has hundreds of other wisdom teachings that are much better for us to learn from. In the meantime, we in our times, need to honor and celebrate the wisdom of “good women.”

To quote the late (great) Congresswoman “Battling” Bella Abzug of New York, “A woman’s place is in the House. The House of Representatives... and the Senate and the White House.”

Please join with me as we turn to wisdom in James and Mark...

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Humility that comes from wisdom. How many of us can claim humility that comes from wisdom? Watch yourself. Once your hand goes up you demonstrate before your sisters and brothers in faith a lack of humility and wisdom. Isn’t that something?

Listen to some words of wisdom coming from sages through the ages. They are words about greatness and goodness; words about wisdom and humility.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th century

“A great [person] is always willing to be little.”

Helen Keller, 20th century

“I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble.”

William Shakespeare, 15th century

“[One] is not great who is not greatly good.”

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 20th century

“True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

Martin Luther King Jr., 20th century

“Not everybody can be famous but everybody can be great, because greatness is determined by service.”

Madeleine L'Engle, 20th century

“Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or someone else.”

In today's texts, James and Jesus add to mightily to the wisdom of the ages. We will let the little brother of Jesus speak first. When we consider wisdom, we often go to the mind and

focus on the one who shares great insights into the nature and character of life.

James shares a lot in this passage on “what wisdom isn’t.” Wisdom has absolutely nothing to do with envy, selfish ambitions, boastfulness, and speaking lies. When someone is does that they are unspiritual and devilish. No one who unspiritual and devilish should be followed by the faith ones in Christ Jesus our Lord. Why? Because “where there is envy and selfish ambitions, there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind,” says James.

I am sorry. But, I feel as if James is living in our reality right now. Do you feel that as well? It is almost like he pitched his tent in our nation’s Public Square and composed his letter as a letter to the editor rather than a letter to First Century Christians. But, wait... there’s more.

Instead, James writes, a harvest of righteousness comes from pure, peaceable, gentle, merciful and “good fruits” kind of living. Then James offers a very nonintellectual answer to the question of “*who is wise and understanding among you?*” To detect wisdom in another don’t listen to their words or read what they say or what they think, instead, “Watch what they do.” Wisdom is connected to honesty, truthfulness, integrity.

Humility is the demonstration of all this in ways that draw no attention to you in any way.

In Micah 6:8, the prophet answers the age-old question, “what does God require of us in this life?... three things, “to do justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God.” Each week this passage is our bulletin as it closes the Open and Affirming Statement of our congregation – now 16 years old. We focus on doing justice. We can even focus on loving tenderly or loving kindness. But, how do we humbly walk with God?” One of my colleagues, and friends, Rabbi Howard Apathaker said the truest words I have ever heard about humbly walking with God. Rabbi Apathaker said, *“if someone is true and real in their humble walk with God, we don’t even know this until the time of their death. Even, then it comes out slowly from a variety of unexpected people and sources who unearth the real nature of this man or woman’s humble walk with God.”*

Think about the people who have humbly walked with God in your life. The minute you draw attention to them, they recede from the spotlight. They seek no attention. They go about their life and their work with no need to be celebrated and extolled. They may have no academic degree and no social pedigree. They show up late at night with food and water for the men and women who sleep on the streets. They stand

guard on our playgrounds with children a recess and when they are there, no fights ever break out and those who are hurt in any way are cared for immediately – with no credit to the caregiver. They quietly care for the lost, the least, the left behind, the forgotten ones, the forsaken ones, the ones others fail to see and acknowledge. To paraphrase James 4:7, *“they have submitted themselves to God.”*

Last month I was with my mother, Lorene Ahrens, for three days. My mother is one of my greatest heroes – the first hero of my life. Now, 90 years and 4 months old, mom was born on Mother’s Day 1928 and we celebrated her on birthday May 13th – Mothers’ Day 2018. Very cool. As I was with mom, there was clear image of her that swept over me when I was in her apartment. She was working at the kitchen sink, head down, focused on washing dishes, or something related to cooking. I remember throughout my childhood, coming in the kitchen to talk with my mom as she was preparing something for others. Already exhausted from teaching 7th, 8th and 9th graders reading and theatre, I would find her humbly bowed in careful preparation for others to receive a blessing of her great cooking and careful and kind way of giving. I was always chattering about the what had happened in the day, what teachers had said, what students had done or said. What

I learned. She was listening and loving me as I went on and on and on.

I think of this image because it speaks to me of humility and wisdom – my mother’s. She was and continues to be a servant of God in the best possible way.

Do you have images like this of people you love and admire? Are they humble and wise – beyond words but driven by actions of kindness and love?

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is confronted with his disciples who appear to be neither humble nor wise. They are boasting among themselves about who will be greatest among them. You can imagine the scene. As they walk along the road and still as they settle into the lakeside house in Capernaum, they are squawking about themselves, among themselves. Matthew says, “did you see the way I helped that crippled woman who was making her way to Jesus? I was such an amazing disciple today.” Peter pipes in, “He likes me best. Isn’t that obvious? He calls me his rock. I am #1!” Judas adds, “He smiled and winked at me today. I think he knows I’m special. Maybe that was his way of saying, ‘Judas, you different than the rest.’” It’s like the children going out of the classroom in elementary school, each vying for the position of “who’s first-in-line.”

Jesus will have none of this. He says, “whoever is first must be last and servant of all.” To make his point, Jesus finds a child in the house and says, “*whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me*” (Mark 9:37).

But, let’s not judge the disciples too harshly. We all resemble this situation in all too many ways. We find ourselves wanting to be noticed and seeking places of recognition at work and in life. We can identify with them – if we allow ourselves to be honest about it. Jesus turns this into a teaching moment. He points the disciples to the humble way, the way of wisdom. By holding up a child as the model of discipleship, he clears the air of misdirected discipleship which resembles jockeying for position in line at the doorway of heaven.

We would be wise to take our lead from our leader – who teaches us all to be servant leaders – not boastful or boisterous – but humble and wise.

Today, we celebrate our legacy at First Church. We have had a great number of titans of church and society who have been counted among our members across the years. But, we have also had thousands of humble, just, loving and wise women and men who entered to worship here and departed to serve God. Thanks be to God!

In a month, we will commemorate one of them with the opening and dedication of the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park. On this 166th Birthday of our church, I recall Dr. Gladden's words to this congregation delivered 116 years ago this week from this pulpit on the occasion of our 50th Anniversary, our Golden Jubilee.

The work of the church is not yet done. The character of the work has greatly changed...and the difficulties are somewhat increased...But there are people enough all about us who need the Gospel and no better place can be found for a church of Jesus Christ, a church ministering in His name to those who need Him most... To maintain it here will require of the members a little more time, a little more resolution, a little more sacrifice, and a little more love, than some churches require of their members, but no more than it will be good for us to give.

To humbly and wisely follow Jesus into the crowded ways of life in our city, in our nation and in our world requires a lot of each one of us! I would like to tell you it is easy. But, I have found that nothing worth anything in life is easy. Take a look at our covenant on the front cover of the bulletin. It says that **“we have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith we respect each other in our honest convictions.”**

When our forebearers in faith stepped out of Second Presbyterian Church to ultimately become First Congregational Church 160 years this week, they carried these words out the door and into the streets. This is a radical Christian concept. It was really radical then. It is even more so now. For 166 years we have lived into this covenant.

This means that each one of us has to interpret the principles of the Christian faith while every other one of us respects each of us in our honest convictions. It calls us to be thinking Christians. It calls us to be expressive Christians. It calls us to be living our faith out of conviction not out of a creed that we may speak but not fully believe. It calls us to listen to one another. It calls us to interact with the other. It calls us to follow Jesus and own what we do and say. We have to be responsible for what we believe and how we express it.

In all honestly, it calls us to be humble and wise.

In the words of Helen Keller, “may each of us long to accomplish a great and noble task, but in so doing, may we make our chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble.” Amen.

Copyright 2018, First Congregational Church, UCC