

A Life That's True
September 16, 2018
Proverbs 1.20-33, Mark 8.27-38
Pentecost +17B
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We're not too interested in street preachers. In fact, most of us here aren't too interested in preachy preachers at all. We know the folks who pop up down on Bourbon Street with their signs and loud cries for tourists from Iowa to repent on their vacation. We even unexpectedly hosted a couple of these street preachers on our front sidewalk a while back as word got to them of our wide welcome and genuine belief that love wins.

No, we aren't too interested in hearing from the street preachers. And yet, Proverbs takes us to the call of Lady Wisdom (the very one setting her table on the cover of our order of service today) as she calls out in the street, in the squares, at the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates. On the one hand, we're excited to delve into these feminine texts and cheering Wisdom on as she raises her voice, she cries out, she speaks. It's exciting when we remember that scripture holds space for the holy Divine even if many readers of scripture do not.

But we're not big fans of being yelled at. And whether we like it or not, our culture then is no more a fan than the culture millennia ago of being yelled at by a fiery woman. And yet Wisdom raises her voice, finds the crowd, and bellows into the crowds:

How long will you waste your time with distractions? How long will you love vapid entertainment and mindlessness? How long will you deny what is true and right and worthy of your one wild and precious life?¹ I have offered you a better way again and again and again, but you ignore me. I can't help but laugh at the foolishness of your life when you know good and well that there is a better path, a better portion, a better way to live into the truth of who you are. If you will take my hand, listen to my words, live this thing out, I promise you will be secure and you will live at ease.

Maybe we wouldn't mind some street preaching like that, after all. Well, in the right setting. Not while we're out with friends, of course. And maybe just at a reasonable

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day", "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

tone and not a raised voice. So dramatic, that Wisdom. And we could do without the reminders of calamity and distress and anguish. We have quite enough of that in our lives and on our news feeds already, thank you very much. So I suppose we're saying that Lady Wisdom has a point, but we'd prefer to hear it whispered to us at the beach with our toes in the sand when we're already primed to actually believe what she is saying. On our terms. When we're ready. I guess we're not even excited about a really *good* street preacher.

One of my very favorite Garrison Keillor stories came from a 1990s collection of stories about New York and his observation of folks who preach on Subway cars to a captive audience. Everyone starting down, sure to not make eye contact, headphones in, steadily ignoring the unwelcome assault and assurance of hell on their evening commute. Keillor said he had a fantasy of preaching Thoreau on the subway. He would stand by the doors, one hand grasping a pole to steady him, the other holding *Walden*, and he would preach:

"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. Our lives are frittered away by detail...In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify."²

A gentler street preaching but one still replete with harsh truths. One wall of my office is presently covered with not one but four large posters of to-do lists as I toggle between my tasks of program director, building manager, event planner, children's minister, worship creative director, non-profit executive director, and volunteer board member. Meanwhile, Thoreau preaching, "I say, let our affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand." Then he speaks of those thousand-and-one items. A little close to the bone as my family purges and sorts all of our worldly possessions in preparation for our move to the Lake Oaks neighborhood. Bag after bag, box after box, leaving our home for the trash or recycling or yet another Goodwill donation.

I like to think that Lady Wisdom gets the attention of her audience. She starts in the crowded spaces, raising her voice to be heard, but she has a message that's speaking to the hearts of the people who are passing by, rushing to their hundred or thousand tasks, burdened by their thousand-and-one-items. She tells them what they already

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "'Our life is frittered away by detail...Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let our affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand...Simplify, simplify!'"

know: you can barely take one more step holding all of that. I'm laughing all day watching you try. Listen to me. I promise if you listen to me you will be secure and you will live at ease."³

The promise of living with ease grabs my attention. Hooks me. Quiets my racing mind and holds my listening ears. The great Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg is an expert guide in many types of spiritual practice, but it is her meditation teaching on Metta Bhavana or cultivating loving kindness that sparks true for me. The practice is quite simple, as meditation is ultimately about sitting, stilling, silencing, wandering, noticing, and returning. In loving kindness meditation, you do not empty the mind of thoughts or notice thoughts like clouds floating overhead. Instead, you visualize all kinds of people. Let's go with one example of how this meditation might look.

Imagine concentric circles. You are at the center-most point of the circles. Then the next circle out is the people you love the very most in this world. The third circle is folks you interact with regularly and are rather neutral toward—either acquaintances at church and work or the young man who bags your groceries every week. Then move out a circle more and get to the people who rub you the wrong way, make your heart race, move you into fighting position. And add circles as far as you want: strangers and neighbors across your city, nation, and on to global neighbors. With each circle, you visualize that person or group and repeat:

May you be safe
May you be strong
May you be content
May you live with ease

May you be safe
May you be strong
May you be content
May you live with ease

May you be safe
May you be strong
May you be content
May you live with ease

³ Proverbs 1.33

Lady Wisdom says to the crowds passing by, "Listen to me. I promise if you listen to me you will be secure and you will live at ease."

Our three scripture readings weave a story together about what is true. And not just what is truth in some kind of philosophical sense for us to engage at a safe, intellectual distance. These are questions about what is really real and how the really real shapes a life. What does a life that's true look like?

The psalmist invites us into another meditation: notice the heavens. Notice the sun in the day and the moon in the night. The sky itself is telling us about the glory of God. The sun is pouring speech over us and the moon is declaring knowledge. This wordless story covers us all—more desired than gold and sweeter than honey. Are you paying attention to what is really real? It's right in front of you!

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "Who do people say that I am?" He listens to their responses, though he already knows what folks out there are saying. And he knows the folks out there are saying a whole lot more than just John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets because he's about to start talking about getting killed. He knows good and well what people are saying. What he really wants to know is, Who do you say that I am?"

What's really going on here? Why are we living in this way together? Why are we breaking bread with people the religious establishment calls outcasts? Why are we pushing hard against the good religious folks to consider what is worth fighting for and what's just idolatry? Why are we healing the sick and raising the dead and casting out demons and changing people's lives? Who do you say that I am, friends?

In asking this question, he's also asking the disciples to consider who they really are. Is this all parlor tricks? Is this just a fling of resistance as we stick it to the man but run and hide when the pressure rises? What are you really about? What guides and shapes your thoughts? If you're going to let your life be about two or three things instead of a hundred or a thousand, then what are you holding most closely? And is it what's good and best and true? Is it the stuff that will allow you to live with ease? Is it the stuff that will enable the people around you, whom you love, to live with ease? Is it strong enough that when you encounter strangers and difficult people and corrupt power that the core of who you are, the truth of your being, is strong enough to bless even them to live with ease?

If you want to live in this Way, I'm telling you right now that you have to lose some things. You will have to let that stuff go—the baggage, the thousand-and-one-items

you think make your life better, the pretense, the false self, the fear, the anger. You have to lose it. Let that life die. And when you finally get to that point, you are going to discover you have saved your life and now get to begin again with something true.

Lady Wisdom is calling. She's shouting in the streets, chasing after you to be heard. And if you're wondering which voice is the voice of Wisdom, calling you to live a life that's true, calling you to let go of what brings death, shouting to you of releasing excess and grabbing essentials with both hands, remember the words of Solomon, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace (Proverbs 3: 17)." The life God calls you to is the life that brings peace, expands love, and compels you to live with ease. The life Wisdom calls you to is the life that knows what matters and what does not. The life Christ calls you to is the life that makes the ways of peace and love available to all people, everywhere, until that love has rippled out to the whole of creation. Listen for her calling you to a life that's true.

Amen.