

eLectionary Readings Discussion for Sunday, September 20, 2009

A Ministry of Christ the Redeemer Church, San Marcos, Texas

You have to BE a friend to have a friend.

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The Lectionary Readings for the week:

Proverbs 31:10-31 Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a Mark 9:30-37

One cannot have too many friends. You need at least six friends to carry your casket to the grave. Most of us don't have a lot of "friends" because it takes a lot of work to have a lot of friends. It costs us time, money and a lot of involvement in their lives to "keep" a friend. You have to BE a friend to have friends. Friends are people who have committed themselves to being involved in our lives, the good times AND the bad or sad times. This is biblical and sound wisdom confirmed in the passages that follow. *"Marry your best friend to have a happy marriage."* That is still my advice to people contemplating marriage and I think it is sage advice. Friendship lasts longer than hormones or physical beauty and will see one through a lot of life with at least a congenial companion. See if you can recognize the roots of this advice in the following passages.

Proverbs 31:10-31

A capable wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

***The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.***

***She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.***

***She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.***

***She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.***

***She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant girls.***

***She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.***

***She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.***

***She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.***

***She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.***

***She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
"Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.***

I am so glad that we are discussing this passage from Proverbs. Never has a scriptural text been used and misused as has this passage. About whom is the author speaking? Whose "voice" is speaking? Why was it written? Is it a "reasonable" guide to what should be expected from a "wife candidate" in your experience? Attempting to discuss this passage makes my point about interpreting scripture without knowing the "actors", the "scene", the "setting" and the motivation of the author(s). Let us look critically at the set, the setting, the actors and possible agendas contained in the verbiage. I think the collators of the Lectionary have "cheated" the readers and created controversy unnecessarily because of their omission of telling the reader that this particular piece of "wisdom" is NOT of Hebrew origin. Back up and read Proverbs 31, verses 1 through 9. This is the ONLY place that the ethereal "King Lemuel" is mentioned in the Bible. He is described as an oracle, "spouting" wisdom that his MOTHER taught him. He probably did not find a woman who met his MOTHER'S expectations so he did not reproduce and is not in the genealogy of the Hebrew Bible? (Read verses 6 and 7 where she advises "giving BEER to those who are perishing and WINE to those in anguish". My "tee-totaler" friends somehow miss quoting that passage.) The point is: I can "prove" almost any position, pro or con, IF you allow me to select and edit the verses that are cited.

Also note that this “perfect woman” has business OUTSIDE the home? Some “spiritual schizophrenics” have even “used” this scripture wrongly to demand a “stay-at-home” mom as the “Biblical ideal”? What “wife candidate” could measure up to such rigorous qualifications? Those who are “daughters-in-law” may have faced this assessment from their potential “mothers-in-law”. I wonder if Solomon could have stood against such criticism. Solomon had LOTS of wives and concubines so we know he ignored this template for “perfection”. At whose selection of a “woman of virtue” was this aimed? What MAN could be worthy of such an exemplary woman? I doubt that any could. Having ideals are wonderful when they are **not used** to condemn or control. Could you or your spouse “measure up” to these criteria? I doubt it. “*Pretty to think so.*” I personally think it would be HELL to be married to such a “perfect” spouse. What “perfect” woman would be married to me, or you? It is hard enough coming close to being “worthy” of the wonderful wife I have. A marriage is a “perfect” opportunity to practice patience, love, mercy AND grace. “Perfected love” means taking people at face value, warts and all. Expecting “perfection” in a mate makes Jack a very lonely boy and fills our divorce courts. The “marriage situation” is, ideally, a reflection of the close, personal relationship we desire to have with our Creator.

Psalm 1

1

***Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!***

2

***Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.***

3

***They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.***

4

***It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.***

5

***Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,
*
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.***

6

***For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.***

Taken at face value and in the broader picture of “wisdom”, this psalm is “self-evident”. “***Draw close to God and He will grow close to you***” is the prime

reasoning that lies behind this advice. It is, again, about a close, personal relationship with our Creator. Make God a close life-long friend.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The Book of James could have been written by a modern psychologist or psychoanalyst. It deals with the nitty-gritty of angst that is created de novo within each of us. Our carnal “nature” is at constant “war” with our “spiritual selves”. If I have learned nothing else, I have learned that “sin” is not on a “sliding scale” on which “murder” is greater or lesser than “lying”. Sin, by definition, is what separates ME from GOD. James puts a face on sin...it is MY FACE. James equates righteousness as ACTION born out of WISDOM. Wisdom allows me to see things from the perspective of others. Wisdom allows me to “put myself in the place of others”. I am reminded of the aphorism, ***“Be kind to the young, the middle-aged and the elderly because, if you live long enough, you will be in their shoes at some point in your life.”*** Cheeses and wines SHOULD improve with age as they MELLOW...and so should WE. Every time I take my eyes off the “wisdom” that I know to be true, my world changes for the worse. Study and worship are important because they FORCE me to re-evaluate my path and the “template” of wisdom and to, once again, return to the “straight and narrow”. We have met the enemy (the devil) and He is US. Again, this is “eastern philosophy” so poorly understood and much maligned in “Christianity”. Christianity continues to be the most “mystical religion” because it imposes “other world” standards and values upon us that we only HOPE and strive to attain. Whether in parent-child relationships, marital relationships, sexual relationships, work relationships or church relationships, Christianity is about person-to-person relationships that will give us a glimpse of Heaven.

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The Gospel of Mark only contains 16 chapters. In these chapters, Mark attempts to "reveal" the humanity of Jesus juxtaposed with the divinity of Jesus. Even those who were his "closest friends" felt reticent to ask him questions. Why do you think this was the case? Jesus showed himself to be "approachable" and "one of the guys" on several occasions so why the fear of questioning? Was it the "get behind me, Satan" response to Peter's rebuke in last week's passages? Are we "afraid" to approach our "fellow heir", our "elder brother"? Is it because we, and they, did not have a CLOSE, personal relationship with Christ? They were afraid to ask for clarification of the statements that Jesus made to them about his betrayal, murder and resurrection but they argued amongst themselves about "who was the greatest"? Are we so self-absorbed that we don't ask the important questions? Are we so focused on OUR stature and OUR "issues" that we separate ourselves from the ONE **with** "the answers"? This passage comes immediately after the healing of the "boy with an evil spirit" in Mark 9:14-29 in which the disciples were unable to "drive out the evil spirit" and Jesus had to intervene and cleanse the boy. Many times we "try our best" and forget that Jesus can do all things THROUGH us. God NEVER fails. WE just forget to ask for his presence in our actions and then, in our ignorance, we blame God.

Taken in the whole, the last portion of this passage speaks to the "attitude" of the believer vis-à-vis our relationships with each other and with God. God rewards humility and obedience with the "open arms" of a parent towards a pleasing child. He puts a "face" on the ones we serve: it is HIS face. Unless Christians can "open their arms" and accept our fellow humans in the same way that God welcomes them, we fail to be "humble and faithful servants". When we put rules and burdens on others that PREVENT our being in a relationship with them, we are not acting in a way that pleases our Lord. We are impelled to establish close, personal relationships with our fellow humans in the same way that we desire to have a close, personal relationship with the Creator. If Jesus can open his arms to the "childish", sinful beings that we ARE, how can we reject anyone? Christianity is about the OPPORTUNITY to develop person-to-person relationships that will give us a glimpse of Heaven. The "rules" of Christianity are simple. Only WE make it difficult and onerous. To "be accepted", we have to be

“accepting” of our fellow sinners. *“Judge not, lest you be judged”* is still good advice. “Discernment” is NOT “judgment” because we have no final say in the issue. Discernment is how we evaluate how WE interact and have a relationship with another person. “Judging people”, on the other hand, leads to punishment and that is best left up to our Father who is capable of rightly judging our hearts and motivations for our actions. Our “friends” discern our relationship as valuable but do not “judge” us. I can tell a lot about a person by examining their friends. If their “friends” have discerned that they are of value, who am I to disagree with their discernment? Thank the Good Lord that he is open to being OUR friend. IF God is your friend, who am I to judge you? WE become the “friends of God” by being “friends” to his entire Creation. In order to “have friends”, we must BE friends to someone. Friendship begins with **hospitality**...a very prominent message in all of scripture. ***“Be ye KIND to one another.”*** What ever happened to common courtesy and civility? Why do people believe that they must be “perfect” to associate themselves with any particular “church group”? Is that the image that we project? Is our “faith so weak” that we don’t trust ourselves to “associate with THOSE sinners” without “getting some of it on us”? IF we are part of any group, we have to sense that they are accepting of us or we leave. Hospitality is a metaphor for the “open arms of God” who welcomes the “sinner” back into a close, personal relationship. We have to BE a friend to have friends.