

Bible Study
Proper 20, Year B
September 20, 2015

(RCL) Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

How Do We Treat One Another?

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.” (Mark 9:35-37)

Proverbs 31:10-31

How did this description of “a capable wife” strike you? For some, it may seem a model of self-sacrificing generosity and a poetic celebration of the valuable roles women played in ancient society (and still play, in many cultures, today). For others, it may reek of patriarchal inequality and seem of little relevance given our changed understanding of marriage and gender roles. When a single passage can provoke such differing responses, it is worth pausing to consider the ways our own experiences and personal histories shape our understanding of the text.

As a case study, reread verse 21. To most Episcopalians, the first half of the verse might provoke chuckles: “She is not afraid for her household when it snows...” *Good*, we might think. *Glad there is no irrational fear of white stuff falling from the sky!* To others, who may have experienced dangerous cold with inadequate clothing or shelter, the wife’s ability to provide plush (and warm) clothes for her family would hardly seem a laughing matter.

- What verses in this passage seem most relevant to your life today?
- What verses seem least relevant?
- How might someone read those same verses and have an opposite reaction?

Psalm 1

From the very first verses, the psalm connects happiness with faithfulness to the law. Those whose “delight is in the law of the LORD” and who “meditate on his law day and night” shall be like fruitful trees, the psalmist tells us, whereas the wicked are “like chaff which the wind blows away.” Righteousness and wisdom are the foundation of happiness, according to Psalm 1.

But why do bad things happen to good people? Or to ask the more exacerbating question: why do good things happen to bad people? It would be a mistake to dismiss the psalmist as naively arguing that faithfulness to God guarantees an easy life. (The psalms are not the place that folks peddling a toxic Prosperity Gospel would have you look, for they are replete with lamentations of the faithful who suffer amid humiliation and defeat.) So the question becomes this:

- What sort of happiness does faithfulness to the law of the Lord in fact provide?
- How does that vision of happiness contrast with our contemporary culture’s understanding of happiness?

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

This is a beautiful passage that, like Psalm 1, speaks of the value of submitting to God. The author identifies conflicting wisdoms that might govern the actions of those he addresses. There is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish” wisdom that leads to “envy and selfish ambition” in the individual and “disorder and wickedness of every kind” in society. Against this, there is “wisdom from above” that is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits...” Trouble arrives, he tells us, when we act based on earthly wisdom and not out of faithfulness to God.

The Letter of James was controversial for much of Christian history, largely because its emphasis on doing good works seemed to clash with parts of Paul’s writings that emphasized salvation by faith alone and not by works. (Other parts of the Pauline corpus—e.g., Romans 2:13—sound like they could have come straight from the Letter of James.) This passage can help us understand that faith in God and charity towards our neighbor are inseparable. It is our faithful adherence to the “wisdom from above” that spurs us to act gently, justly, and in ways that will yield “good fruits.”

- Can you think of a conflict in your own life or in the life of your congregation?
- How does your sense of that conflict shift as you imagine seeking to work through it according to the heavenly wisdom that this passage describes?

Mark 9:30–37

After describing the disciples’ continued misunderstanding of Jesus’ passion prediction, this passage shows us their misunderstanding of Jesus’ values. Just as the psalmist and the letter of James advocate prioritizing heavenly wisdom, Jesus treats others according to a heavenly ethic and wisdom, not according to the hierarchical norms of society. The disciples’ concern for “who was the greatest” reflects their earthly priorities, and Jesus shows how a heavenly ethic reverses earthly expectations. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” Jesus says. He illustrates his point by taking a little child (in an age when such children had little social status) and telling his disciples that service to such a child is indistinguishable from service to him. A child without status can be a proxy for God.

- In our churches, do our children’s ministries demonstrate that we’ve embraced Jesus’ teaching?
- Jesus used the little child as a stand-in for all those without status and power. Who in our communities (and, beyond them, in the world) are the powerless or neglected, and what would it mean for us to treat them as though they were proxies for God?

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