

## **An Abundance of Riches – September 13, 2009**

**Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38; Psalm 116 1-9**

There are weeks when, as I reflect on the scripture readings for the coming Sunday, I wonder what I am going to say. There are not many times like this, just a few each year. But they make the preparation of a sermon a challenging task.

Then there are other weeks, such as this one, when there is an abundance of riches found in every reading. There is enough material for at least three sermons in each. They are full of information to be unearthed and pondered and considered that may lead us to a more positive direction in life. This abundance, too, makes it a challenge to pull together central thoughts in a sermon that will not wander on for an hour or so tiring all of us.

It seems to me that the reading from Proverbs, all about wisdom, undergirds, not only our other two readings, but almost every reading in our Bible. When we have wisdom, we can carefully measure ideas and concerns that pop up before us and take our time before we decide upon the direction we want to take. There is no rush to action or to a judgment, which may lead us into trouble. There is no ignorance or pig-headedness that prevents us from seeing all sides of an issue. There is no refusal to see that we are not the only ones with the right answer. When we have wisdom we have a calmness and centeredness of being, a balance that serves us well in facing whatever it is we will need to handle. Wisdom calls out to us and asks us to heed its call and accept it as a wonderful gift.

We hear the ring of wisdom in the little Letter of James. The author of this letter has traditionally been thought to be James, the brother of Jesus. This letter remained in the Bible in spite of the fact that Martin Luther thought it contradicted Paul's teaching of justification by faith because it had an emphasis on doing good works. Perhaps, it remained a part of our scriptures because of the wisdom revealed in so many readings in it.

The author cautions us about the misuse of our tongues in this morning's selection. He tells us how powerful our words can be for good or for ill. He stresses the evil we do with mean, undermining, thoughtless comments. He certainly seems to be writing to our day and age when a lack of civility is all around us. Many seem to have misplaced common courtesy. We can see this happening in many venues in life from the floor of Congress to the tennis court. So, the author warns of the injury we may cause to others through the unbridled use of our tongues that ignites further damage. This leads to a huge blaze of rumor, untruth, innuendo and strife. Once our words are out of our mouths, they can never be taken back.

There are other ways we do injury when we speak without thinking. We may cut off others or shout them down not allowing them to express ideas and thoughts they would like to share. Or, we might simply tell someone that they "never do anything right," turning our tongues into whips that wound and cut the hearts and souls of others. Too often we do not remember to stop and think what effect a caustic or denigrating comment may have on another person. Such nastiness is mental and/or emotional abuse. If we are not wise enough to curb our tongues we might start something that moves beyond

control and destroys everything in its path. Turning away from the use of wisdom in our interactions with others causes us to make many errors in life.

Life is what Jesus was talking about in our reading from the Gospel of Mark. Life and how it can become not only better but more abundant for us. To achieve the abundance Jesus spoke of requires commitment to his life and teachings, we are told. So much commitment is needed that his followers have always been asked to give up their old, familiar, comfortable way of life to follow him.

That is what we are told his early followers did. They left their lives behind them and tried to grasp and follow a way of life that asked them to set aside any self-serving ways they might have. Jesus called them to lives of service to others. Many of his early followers were very simple people. They followed a person full of charisma whose words and actions touched their deepest human needs, fears and desires. He urged them to let go of the worldly treasures they held most dear to discover what it was that had the most value in life—a closer relationship with God and with their fellow humans.

This was difficult for those early disciples to understand, as it is for us. Perhaps, it is more difficult for us because there are so many more worldly treasures we have. But, this need to change our lives, to live through a “metanoia,” a time of turning around to discover a new way, is really what the message of Jesus is all about. For some, this change is a one-time thing--a sudden turn, a quick awakening. For others of us, it is a far slower process. We begin to allow bits and pieces of the teachings of Christ to filter through all that surrounds us and we begin to move inch by inch into a better understanding of what we are called to do. We discover that what he said makes sense and as we begin to practice being more loving, less judgmental, more forgiving, less angry people we find that we begin to change the world around us. That’s all we can ask for, you know, is to change things one bit at a time—one inch at a time, one outlook on life at a time. But, his way does work when we intentionally practice it. Through our efforts we become stronger people more able to withstand all that comes our way.

We do this when we make the choice to shift our focus from earthly things to Divine things. When we decide we can be better than we are and when we choose to change. No one can change us. We alone are responsible for our lives. We alone can decide to let go of a way of life that is not satisfying, a way that might be leading to our own destruction.

Wisdom, Jesus and the author of the Letter of James all call us to become grown up responsible people; people who should be able to determine the right way to live their lives. People who should be able to establish good relationships with God and with one another, always remembering that we all are the children of God and that there should be no room for ugliness between us. People who can change their little corner of the world by acting wisely, learning to control what they say and think and do, and working to turn their lives around if they are headed down a wrong path.

We need to remember that we all have free will, the opportunity to move forward in the ways of Christ is in our hands. The choice is always ours.

*-- Amen*