

## 09-15-2024 Worship Service

**Morning Prayer** – Velma Hiebert moved to a room at Bethesda on Friday afternoon. Of course, this is a big adjustment for her and for Merlin. We'll include a prayer for them and for the family.

Loving God, we are grateful for your presence in our lives. This morning we are especially filled with gratitude for those who are gifted and willing to help teach. Some work with children, some with jr hi and high school students and some teach and facilitate conversations with and for their peers. It's all an important part of helping each other learn what it means to follow Jesus together in this congregation and in our communities. Grant the wisdom of your Spirit to each one of us from the youngest to the oldest, from the most recent attenders to those who've grown up here for their whole lives. Help us to know that we're all sojourners, learning together, made in your image, God, created to bring you glory and to co-create with you in this world.

We are aware of passages this morning, O God. The marking of time by celebrations of birthdays, anniversaries, special times and moments in our lives when we're aware of your presence with us. We thank you for Luann and Robert as they celebrate their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary today. We thank you for Velma and for Merlin as they are keenly aware of the passage of time and the changes that brings. Be especially close to them as they adjust to these new living arrangements. We're grateful for Bethesda, for all who work and live there, for the good care that's offered to the residents. Be with the rest of the Hiebert family as they also adjust to these changes. We acknowledge, Lord, how a change like this reminds us again of the loss of Myron and we continue to ask for your presence and your comfort in his absence. We think of others who are marking the loss of loved ones on this day and in this season. We pray for Cleo Koop and his family as they grieve the loss and celebrate the life of Faye. Be with them through the time of visitation this evening and the service tomorrow morning.

Sovereign God, we pray for our nation and the nations of this world. As we move closer to election day we are filled to capacity with campaign slogans, politicians vying for our loyalty and our votes, causes vying for our resources and our time. God of all Wisdom and Creation, grant us your perspective. Grant us your calm and grant that our allegiance would remain clearly focused on you. We are grateful for our country and the freedoms it affords. And yet, we know that ultimately we want to be members of your upside-down kingdom where Jesus reigns with unbounded love and the liberation of our souls. Help us to remember that there are other lands and other peoples whom you love in equal measure. You are the Creator of all that is and you've got the whole world in your hands. In confidence we pray. Amen.

### **Got Wisdom? James 3:1-12 and Proverbs 1:20-33 – Education Sunday**

I invite you to bring to mind a really great teacher in your life. Maybe a classroom teacher from your elementary or junior high years, or later in high school... maybe a college professor, or maybe a coach... could be a parent, a grandparent, or another relative. Maybe you had a neighbor or a friend who's been an amazing teacher to you. What kinds of things did this person

teach you that made such a deep impression on you? Was it *what* they taught you or *how* they taught it? Delton's going to show us a brief clip of a beloved teacher from the film, *Dead Poet's Society* set in 1959. We see here a new English teacher named Mr. Keating introducing his Academy Prep School students to some new ways of thinking about literature – and learning. (clip) That last line was a little hard to hear. He said, “Carpe diem – sieze the day, boys... make your lives extraordinary!”

Today we're thinking about teaching. And learning. About how we pass on – and receive – the most significant lessons in our lives. And we're thinking specifically about how we in the church learn how to follow Jesus. Carpe diem might be part of that, but we need wisdom to know how to sieze the day and when and which day to sieze and with whom! Just a bit ago, we recognized and acknowledged what a huge and important role Sunday school teachers play in the process of our learning, starting when we're very young and then continuing through adulthood as we teach and facilitate and challenge each other. We learn the stories of Jesus as well as the stories that formed him from the Hebrew texts. We read together and we talk about it, we test out our ideas and our questions and our experiences. And we trust the presence of the Holy Spirit with us to guide us as we learn together. Actually, this is one reason why support of our Mennonite colleges is so important – that process of academic education is presented alongside of education and discernment for discipleship through an Anabaptist lens.

This morning the lectionary has again given us a passage from Proverbs and a passage from James. Both books are in the genre, the category of Wisdom Literature. James is the only book in the New Testament that falls into this category; we'll come back to James.

Proverbs is a book of poems – like Walt Whitman and Byron referred to by Mr. Keating in the movie clip. Only the poems in Proverbs are much more ancient and their singular purpose is to help the reader attain wisdom. The Hebrew word used here that's been translated “wisdom” could also be understood as “expertise” or “understanding”. Wisdom is what comes after knowledge. Knowledge often comes from experiences using the senses – eyes, ears, touch, taste, smell. Wisdom is gained when one understands what's been experienced and learns to integrate it into life. If we back up just a few verses from what Lady Wisdom read for us and hear the poem in verses 8 and 9, it sounds like this: “Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.” It's not very poetic sounding in English, but in Hebrew it has a lovely cadence and it would have been easier to recall and recite.

The writer or writers of the Proverbs chose to personify Wisdom as a woman who is very present with us in our everyday lives. She meets us in the busy city streets, at the places where we do business and make everyday decisions. She's portrayed as a prophetess, a street preacher, one who is authoritatively speaking God's Truth. She has some pretty strong words and convicting questions! Wisdom is frustrated – feeling that nobody is listening to her! She has so much goodness to offer but humanity, by and large, is just not willing to listen to her or learn from her. And this rejection of her, she says, is a choice the listeners make at our own peril.

The problem is that wisdom isn't learned individually by the most advanced students at the top of the class who can read the fastest and pass all the exams with flying colors. Wisdom is

learned together, as life is lived, as business decisions are made, as the vulnerable are cared for, or not. Wisdom helps us learn how to carry each others' grief – and how to share that load when it's ours to carry. Wisdom is learned when responsibility is taken for mistakes made. When grace can be extended, allowing behaviors to change and forgiveness to come. Wisdom, as she says, is not interested in simply snatching fools out of calamity that they have created for themselves by their own refusal to learn from her. To learn wisdom requires humility, trust, willingness to give and receive counsel, to listen to ideas that are different from our own and genuinely try to understand. To learn wisdom might require us to take some risks, to try something beyond our comfort zone, to think outside our usual boxes.

But wisdom will never ask us to participate in something that hurts others. Wisdom is never mean or self absorbed. She seeks goodness and justice. Wisdom would never condone anything that is detrimental or disrespectful to any of God's creation. And here wisdom can be a little tricky. Sometimes it's difficult to love our neighbors as we love ourselves when we're not quite sure if we do love ourselves or we don't know exactly how to love ourselves. Wisdom will always be on the side of respect and good health for ourselves and for others. She will not ask us to be bound by guilt or shame or obligation. Wisdom will patiently teach us how to use our gifts in ways that compliment others' gifts and bring joy and fulfillment to us and to the community. Again, wisdom is often learned together, not just individually.

Now let's turn to James to top off our morning lesson on wisdom. One of my favorite theologians, Barbara Brown Taylor, wrote this as commentary about this James 3 passage: "Preachers wise enough to know that they preach chiefly to themselves will spend time praying this passage before attempting to interpret it to their congregations." Amen, sister! So with humility and trepidation, I proceed.

So far, in the first three chapters of James we can sum up his terse instructions like this: First, don't just be hearers of the word of God; if you hear it, then DO it. Second, put away your prejudice and bias and preconceived ideas about people and don't show favoritism in God's kingdom! Welcome EVERYONE to this discipleship journey of following Jesus together. And third – our lesson today from James, chapter 3... We who are teachers (which includes all of us in this priesthood of all believers) are issued a special challenge to control our tongues.

Our speech can be a dangerous and cruel weapon. In James' first-century world teachers were people who had lots of control. Teachers were people who spoke more often than nearly anyone else, especially in public. The art of oratory and rhetoric in that context was a major source of communication, education and entertainment. People would gather in crowds to hear teachers read, speak and debate... a bit like politicians in our time. Those who could speak well were given positions of power and were considered teachers. They were held in high esteem. James was issuing a caution. Be careful. If words are used with arrogance and the intent to dominate, if people in positions of power forget that they are to be in service to those to whom they are speaking, things can get ugly and out of hand pretty quickly.

This discipline of taming our tongues is a constant challenge according to James and he says that, truly, no one can really do it very well! It's this tiny little disastrous part of us that has unbounded potential to cause wounded-ness and wreckage and worry. And yet... it also has the

potential to create, James reminds us. With our tongues we create language and become co-creators with God like in the Genesis story, naming all the creatures that God created. With our tongues we can speak of God's faithfulness and love! We can speak God's truths into the world! Creativity and imagination can be articulated and we can sing and speak our praises to God! One of the most heinous punishments for our Anabaptist forebears who were martyred for their faith was that their tongues were either cut out or silenced with tongue screws when they refused to stop singing and reciting scripture.

We have so much potential for good and for ill when we choose our words. I'll leave you with three ideas for ways we can practice using our words here at church, with one another.

First, what if, rather than asking the expected but inane questions of greeting, we could be a little more deliberate. For instance, could we move from asking "How are you?" to "How's your spirit?" or from, "What's goin' on?" to "Where have you noticed God's love lately?" Maybe we could ask each other "What are you struggling with these days – and how can I pray for you?" Those sorts of questions might seem weird or invasive at first, but they might also help us try to use language in ways that help us nurture our faith with one another and care more deeply for each other.

Second, remember that behind our words lie our intentions. Are we genuinely trying to communicate clearly, gently, honestly? Or are we trying to control others with our words? What's motivating us to speaking? We're complicated beings, so sometimes it's a combination of things – not just one or the other. In these times when people are so strident with words, maybe those of us who try to follow Jesus together can be less strident and more intentional about choosing our words.

Third, I wonder if our church is a safe place for us to practice helping each other learn how to tame our tongues and name our faith? I don't think James is saying that taming our tongues means being silent. I understand it to also mean being honest, discerning, gentle but direct, wise. Just think what we could accomplish if we could practice these kinds of disciplines with one another! The deep wisdom that's already present among us could be even stronger. We could shine the light of God's love even brighter. We could move out from here, into the world with an even clearer sense of who we are – a gifted, loved, wise community of Jesus followers welcoming others to join us on the journey. Amen.

**Offering Prayer** – O God, bless these gifts and those who've given them. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the living of these days, as we serve you and your children in your world. Amen.

**Benediction** – We ask your blessing, O Lord, on the food that will be eaten, whether it's here in the Fellowship Hall or in people's homes, or in a restaurant or a park. Bless the meal that is to come. And now, as we go out from here, go with us Lord, make your face shine on us every day. Help us to remember that we are sent by you, wherever we are living, to be salt and light as people of the Way. Amen.