



Mount Olive Devotion

The 17th Week of Pentecost (September 21-25, 2020)

Monday

Proverbs 9:7-12

⁷ Whoever corrects a scoffer wins abuse; whoever rebukes the wicked gets hurt.

⁸ A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you.

⁹ Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning. ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. ¹¹ For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.

¹² If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it.

In the book of Proverbs there are innumerable verses lifting up the difference between the wise and the scoffers. A scoffer is one who delights in deriding others, showing contempt for them, and generally refusing to learn or take advice or listen to anyone. Here the writer notes that someone who attempts to correct a scoffer only gets abused and hurt. Most interesting is the contrast between the scoffer and the wise when rebuked: the scoffer hates you, while the wise person loves you all the more. This is something worth pondering. Perhaps you can think of a rebuke you received from someone. How did you take it? Or perhaps you had occasion to rebuke someone else. How did they receive it? Jesus famously said that there is no point in “throwing pearls before swine”, meaning that to try to share wisdom with a fool is usually a waste of time. These ancient words remind us that wisdom involves humility, an open spirit, and a willingness to listen. We may not be able to do much about the scoffers we encounter, but we certainly can pray that God would keep us from becoming one ourselves.

Prayer

Merciful God, how we need your wisdom. How we need your Spirit. We confess that often we have played the role of the scoffer, unwilling to listen, to humble ourselves, and to learn from others. Forgive us, gracious God. Grant that we might leave behind our prejudices and pride, and instead seek true wisdom, that is found in Christ. In whose name we pray. AMEN.

Tuesday

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

These famous ancient words come to us, scholars believe, from three or four hundred years before Christ. The author is unknown, referred to as the Teacher. The Teacher writes as an old person who has seen much of the world and now wishes to leave behind some nuggets of wisdom. Seven pairs of opposites make up this brief poem, seven being the number of completeness. In looking at these pairs we see a realism that is sometimes lacking in our perspective. We might, for example, wonder why there must be both a time to heal and a time to kill, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to love and a time to hate. Wouldn't the world be a better place if killing, weeping, and hating were eliminated? While that might be so, the Teacher is simply sharing life as seen from his or her perspective. There *are* times of weeping – they will come. There *are* times when people kill one another – they will come. There *are* times when people hate – there is simply no avoiding this. Maybe what the Teacher is saying to us is that we should not be surprised nor be alarmed by the fact that *all* these times exist, and are likely to exist for as long as humans inhabit the earth. Knowing this, we might find it easier to bear the burdens of the day, and let God be the One in charge.

Prayer

We confess our anxiety, Loving God, concerning the times in which we live. We sometimes wonder if times of peace, and healing and embracing will come again. Give us grace, dear Lord, to work to change the things we can change, and to give those things that we cannot change over to you. In your wise name we pray, AMEN.

Wednesday

Psalm 90:1-6, 12

¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. ² Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. ³ You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.” ⁴ For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. ⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; ⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. ¹² So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

This psalm contrasts God’s eternal existence with human mortality. Notice the superlatives when the psalmist refers to God: “From everlasting to everlasting you are God!” This seems to say that as far back in the past as eternity is, there is God, *and* as far into the future as eternity is, there is God too. So if the psalmist was trying to measure God’s eternity and was standing amidst a gigantic ruler, God’s existence would stretch eternally in both directions. Immeasurable. Beyond imagination. That is God’s existence. Our human existence is quite another story. If a thousand years to God is “like yesterday when it is past” and our days are less than a hundred, then perhaps in God’s timekeeping, our existence can be understood as just a few hours in human terms. When one thinks of this, that compared to God’s existence, ours is but a brief sojourn here, it is all the more amazing that God seems so concerned about us. As another psalmist said, “Oh Lord, what are mortals, that you take notice of us?” Yet, we know that God’s love for us is sure and eternal, shown in all of its glory in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Prayer

God of all time, how we praise you for your everlasting wisdom and love. From before the foundations of the earth you are God. You are the Eternal God and we who are so much less than eternal, yet know that you love us with an eternal love. How can we thank you? May all our days be ones lived in praise and thanks to you. In Christ’s name, we pray. AMEN.

Thursday

Matthew 7:12-20

¹² “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. ¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. ¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes the role of a sage, dispensing wisdom to all who will listen. In verse 12 above, we have what has come to be known as the Golden Rule. It’s probably fair to say that every major religion has some version of it in its teaching. In the second section Jesus reminds us that the road that leads to life is sometimes difficult: difficult choices need to be made; treasures left behind; relationships abandoned. The easy road, says Jesus, is not always the one that leads to life. In the third section, Jesus warns of false prophets. The original word could be translated as pseudo prophets, or pretend prophets. In other words they are not truly prophets. They are not truly persons who give wisdom, but rather those who advise us to follow the road that leads to destruction. How will we know these pseudo prophets? By their fruits, says Jesus. We will know them by observing the outcome of their life. This might be very important advice as we look at voting this fall. When we look at the candidates, what is the fruit they are bearing? Is it good fruit or bad? When we consider their career, have they been a blessing or a bane to others? Have they built up or torn down others? Have they sought the good of others or only their own wealth and power? We will know them by their fruits.

Prayer

Thank you, dear Jesus, for your wisdom. Thank you for revealing to us how we may discern false prophets from true ones. Grant that as we live these days, we might have your wisdom. Give us open minds, open hearts, and willing spirits, to walk in the ways that you lead. In your precious name, we pray. AMEN.

Friday

II Timothy 4:1-5

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

In this second letter from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, Paul is encouraging a younger evangelist who was struggling to fulfill his responsibilities. Paul reminds Timothy over and over, in this letter, of the treasure and power of the gospel, and he urges him to continue doing the ministry in spite of the obstacles that consistently present themselves. In this final exhortation Paul reminds Timothy that the message of the gospel must go forth whether “the time is favorable or unfavorable.” This is a word to us as well. Sometimes we might look around and think, “No one is paying attention to the ways and words of God. Why bother sharing them?” But Paul says, “Proclaim the message in season and out of season... convince, rebuke, and encourage, and be patient.” That last bit of advice is perhaps the hardest: be patient. We want so much for things to happen in the way we want them to happen *right now*. And then Paul turns to describe a situation that sounds very much like today – a time when people will “turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” Given that, how much more important it is for us to speak truth these days. Heaven knows, there are already more than enough myths to go around.

Prayer

Dear Lord, in this day when up is down, black is white, and truth is fiction, give us discerning hearts to know and to do your will. We know that we, like so many others, can have “itching ears” and be drawn to those teachers who “suit our own desires.” Give us wisdom to hear rightly, to know truth from falsehood, and to be sharers of truth. Give us wise advisors and faithful leaders who will guide us in your way of truth. In your strong name, we pray. AMEN.