Sermon, September 15, 2024

"Wisdom Calling"

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group: "Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there. The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be." He gave the group a thumbs-up sign and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. "I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a pack, strapped it on her back, and leaped out.

A man stood up. "I am a partner in a large law practice, and the office would fall to pieces without me." He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, "I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won't even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute. He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy.

"Son," said the pastor, "you take the last parachute. You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and safe landing."

The teenager grinned at the older man. "Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my knapsack."

So there is smart and there is wise; there is street smart and common sense. Which would you choose if push came to shove?

We live in a world that tends to pick smart. We celebrate the great champions of Jeopardy. We give *summa cum laudes* to our top college graduates and we are rightly proud of them. But despite all our smartness – our great technological advances of the 20th century, we have put our world at peril – we live under a threat of nuclear destruction, climate change, moral decay, etc.

World War II Gen. Omar Bradley has said,

Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the sermon on the mount.

The renowned 19th century preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, observed:

"Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. To know is not to be wise. Many people know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great a fool as a knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom."

Perhaps Rev. Spurgeon was preaching from today's first reading from the Book of Proverbs – a reading seemingly as timely today as it was 2,500 years ago when it was written. It personifies Wisdom as a female figure who goes out into the city streets and calls people to abandon their foolish ways, if you're old enough you'll remember the play, "Godspell", when the siren sings "Forswear thy foolish ways".

But for the most part we haven't – and wisdom isn't highly respected either. We make jokes about one who is wise – the old man with the long beard living alone in an isolated cave.

So what is wisdom? Like the Tao of Chinese philosophy, it's the gentle movement that undergirds and gives life to all creation. It makes connections – looks at the long-term connecting the needs of the moment with a deep sense of God's vision.

Peter didn't have it in today's gospel. He had some knowledge; he provided the right answer to the most important question Jesus asks either then or now. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gets it right, at first – "You are the Messiah the Son of the living God" but Peter is like the school kid who memorizes a bunch of facts from a text and may pass the test but doesn't truly understand the subject.

Peter answers from the knowledge perspective, similar to pp. 849 to 850 of the BCP that try to explain who Jesus is. Not wrong answers but not wise ones – not deep enough.

When Jesus explains what being the Messiah implies: living selflessly and recognizing the reality of suffering – a mission that extends itself to a suffering world. Peter doesn't get that.

Jesus wants Peter and the rest of the disciples to give a wise answer, to answer from their experience and from their hearts. Do they pass the test?

He asks, "Who do **you** say that I am?"

I'm guessing there's a long silence in the wake of this second question. The disciples shuffle their feet. Cough. Avoid eye contact with Jesus. Maybe they cast anxious glances at each other, each one hoping someone else will answer.

And I imagine Jesus, standing patiently and vulnerably in their midst through that long silence, waiting to hear what his closest friends will say about him. Can they differentiate between the talk on the street and the witness of their own hearts? Are they willing to stake their lives on what they've experienced firsthand of Jesus? Do they really know him? Trust him? Love him?

With his second question, Jesus asks his followers to put aside other people's interpretations, and articulate their own. It's not enough, he implies, to recite the creeds, the traditions, the theologies, the abstractions. It's not sufficient to rely on other people's answers. At some point, our faith must become personal. Intimate. Invested.

And while Peter doesn't get the answer right at this time, he will live into the answer with his life. How will he do that despite making multiple mistakes along the way? This is how Debie Thomas describes it:

Jesus: *"Who do you say that I am?"* Peter: *You're the one who said "Yes, come walk on the water with me." You're the one who caught me before I drowned. You're the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame. You're the one who told me — accurately — that I'd be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. You're the one I denied to save my own skin. You're the one who looked into my eyes when the cock crowed. You're the one who found me on the beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation. You're my Messiah.*

Now that's a right answer. A lot of wisdom in that answer. What's your answer?