

LFLC – Sermon for September 19/21

Proverbs 31: 10-31; James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9: 30-37

I thought more than twice about using the Proverbs passage this morning. There was a time when that passage was read at the funeral of highly respected women in the community or congregation.

Well, you have probably noticed that times change and now the passage is seen as stereotypical, sexist, limiting of a woman's gifts and potentials. You read the passage and wonder – did she ever take a day off, ever sit down and enjoy a glass of wine?

I agree – but we need to remember that the passage is at least 2500 years old and, in those days, would have sounded quite progressive. The woman is an entrepreneur, creative, a blessing to family and community.

She lived the best life she could in the social restrictions of that age. She had character!

The Book we call Proverbs is part of the Wisdom tradition of Israel. Some of it is religious but much is also just practical lessons for living. You probably grew up in a family with its list of favourite Proverbs.

When an elderly widow decided to marry a questionable suitor, my Mother would always say, “No fool like an old fool.”

When one of us got new clothes, the remark was always, “Fine feathers make fine birds.”

Growing up on a farm, there were dozens of Proverbs: “Don't count your chickens until they are hatched.” Or, when we made choices that brought failure – “The chickens come home to roost.”

The story books we read had proverbial messages, such as the Tortoise and the Hare.

African languages are full of proverbs. It was one reason that learning Chichewa, the language of Malawi, was so frustrating for Linda and me. Sentences often contain a proverb which left us scratching our heads.

2 well-known proverbs from East/Central Africa:

When you want to travel quickly, travel alone. When you want to travel well, go with others.

When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

Proverbs are a way of teaching basic truths in a memorable manner. And the purpose of all wisdom, I think, is to build character.

Proverbs 31 says of the woman, “Strength and Dignity are her clothing . . . she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” Still relevant today . . .

The closest to a Wisdom text in the NT is the Letter of James. Today we heard, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” James contrasts the so-called wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God which promotes what is pure, gentle, full of mercy and bearing good fruits.

Listen to these verses: **A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.**

The disputes we have come from our cravings, our lusting over those things we do not have – often to spend on useless pleasures.

Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

You can read over these in a minute - just like eating popcorn – tasty but don’t last. But ponder them, remember the purpose: **to live a life of character guided by the wisdom from above.**

Covid 19 has tested our individual and collective characters.

The current federal election for all its controversy and wrangling is the test not only of our leaders, but of our national character and we are seeing aspects of the latter that are troubling indeed.

The anti-vaxxers verbal, even physical, abuse of health care workers has to be the most egregious.

How do we develop character, how do we instill wisdom, when the whole planet seems to be tilting?

I had one of those serendipitous moments a couple of weeks ago – I lead a Men’s Group made up of men from all faiths – some more fervent than others. The theme was simply to discuss how we are bearing up in these Covid days and how character comes in to play.

I chanced upon an article on Victor Frankl who wrote the classic *Man’s Search for Meaning*, published in 1959. I haven’t read that book for years but it has always figured in my theology.

Briefly, Frankl was an Austrian Psychiatrist, living in Vienna in the 1930’s. With the rise of Naziism, and being a Jew, Frankl secured passage to the USA. But when he visited his aging parents, he new he couldn’t leave them. So they remained in Vienna and the inevitable happened. They were arrested and shipped to Auschwitz.

Frankl was useful to the Nazis: he could treat the prisoners and calm them down; and he could treat the Guards in their need. So for 4 years he watched thousands of his fellow Jews marched to the Incinerators. It turned out Frankl’s beloved wife was housed no more than a mile away, but he never saw her again.

The question arises: how do you live – not just exist – but live with integrity and character in that, or any environment? In his book he discusses 3 aspects of character:

[purposeful work](#), [love](#), and [courage in the face of difficulty](#). Love . . .

We were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. “*Et lux in tenebris lucet*” — and the light shineth in the darkness. For hours I stood hacking at the icy

ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was there. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me.

On Purpose – when the future holds no hope, when death is imminent:

We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life — daily and hourly

Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance . . .

The character of Jesus' disciples was continually tested – no more than on the night Jesus was betrayed. But Mark describes a day when the disciples split off from Jesus and had a jolly good argument about who would be the greatest. Was that not the way we humans organize?

Jesus said that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. And then the extraordinary statement: Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.

The wisdom of the world is turned upside down by the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes when we preach about Jesus, or discuss his teachings, we forget about his character and how almost everyone – except the lowly and the women – misunderstood him.

In the midst Jesus held on to the Love of Abba; he knew his purpose and held true; his courage led him to the Cross.

Jesus would approve of Frankl's assertion:

it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.

We cannot change many of the external realities we face. Do we just give in to them? Do they dictate our lives?

Do we submit to the values of a society becoming ever more materialistic and neurotic?

Or do we face them, as Jesus did, as Frankl did, with love, purpose and courage?

My own perspective is that in too many ways the Church in our generation has tried to be all things to all people – to fit in. We have bought into the values of a broken society. We don't want to offend anyone.

The result is a dilution of our character, a weakening of our discipleship.

This does not mean we should harass passersby or pick a fight with everyone. To be holier-than-thou is not Gospel.

But we listen not to the world but to the Saviour of the world. That takes courage, that develops character.

As we come to the Table today, let us ask Jesus for his wisdom in the living of these days.