



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 17
Proper 20 (B)
September 19, 2021

RCL: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Proverbs 31:10-31

The grand finale to the book of Proverbs—a book which one scholar describes as “devoted to cultivating wise *men*”—is a husband’s tribute to the “capable wife” (v. 10), herself a picture of wisdom. This string of proverbial pearls is a Hebrew acrostic poem—an expression “from A to Z” (or *aleph* to *tav*) of the excellence of someone whose way of life overflows with skill and beauty, even while she is, as our collect for the week says, “placed among things that are passing away.” Where does her strength come from? Again reverberating with the spiritual logic of our collect, the proverb-poem sets forth her highest and grounding virtue in the second-to-last verse: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised” (v. 30). It’s this loving awe of God that grounds her life and makes it, in its particular way, a window to God’s own creativity, activity, and goodness.

- What do you think of when you think of “the fear of the LORD?” Can you think of other biblical passages where “the fear of the LORD” is discussed or that might help give a fuller picture of the meaning of this phrase as it is used in Scripture?
- While this passage may feel difficult to some of us reading it from a modern perspective, how might this person also be seen to demonstrate both leadership and interdependence in her own context?

Psalm 1

Since the earliest centuries of the church’s life, Christians have read this psalm as being first and foremost about *Christ*. He is the one who has “not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful.” He is the one whose delight has been “in the law of the Lord.” He is the “tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season.” And as we grow in Christ by faith, our lives come to look like this too. Even though the original language of the psalm in Hebrew is masculine and singular (“Blessed/happy is the man [*ha’ish*]...”), Christian readers have long understood this “man” as the Christ who mystically includes all whom he saves. As Basil the Great wrote in the fourth century, “Why, you say, does the prophet single out only man and proclaim him happy? Does he not exclude women from happiness? By no means. For, the virtue of man and woman is the same, since creation is equally honored in both; therefore, there is the same reward for both” (Homilies on the Psalms 10.3).

- What does this psalm tell us about what it means to be happy?

- What do you think Basil the Great has in mind when he speaks of a “reward?”
- What else stands out to you about this psalm?

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

This section from the Letter of James is situated in a wider discussion of the tongue and who can be trusted to teach (3:1). It would seem from this reading of James that the trustworthy teacher is the same one who is “wise and understanding”—who lives a “good life” and whose “works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (v. 13). A red flag that someone who wants to teach might not be ready yet is that “envy and selfish ambition” keep showing up in them, even internally (vv. 14 and 16). This kind of internal disorder may result in “boastful” speech rather than sound teaching (v. 14).

If you, like me, desire to bless others with your words but find yourself noticing difficult things internally, don’t give up hope. The author of this epistle includes himself among those who “make many mistakes” (3:2), but his holy teaching has, by the grace of God, made it down to us through the millennia. His final advice in the passage assigned as our lesson for today also speaks to me. Wherever you are in your Christian life, wherever you find yourself, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (4:7-8). There is always hope for the person who is willing to yield to God’s Spirit. In fact, it’s what the Christian life is about!

- How does this picture of wisdom compare to the picture of a wise life given in the other readings for today?

Mark 9:30-37

In this run of interwoven passages in Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ disciples are thinking (as we all do, unaided by God’s grace) along pretty unfailingly earthly lines. This section takes us straight into the heart of the tension between natural and grace-assisted ways of thinking. Earthly habits of thought, as we see in verses 30-32, can’t begin to comprehend the mystery of the Resurrection. And the disciples don’t comprehend it on their own. We are told they are too “afraid to ask” (v. 32). Jesus’s mercy in this case pierces through their silence. Instead of rebuking them for their human preoccupation with rank and order (v. 34), he gives them an object-lesson (really a human-being-lesson) and an example when he takes a child into his arms. He takes the lowest-status person in the house—who is also probably the simplest and least complicated—and embraces him. And not only that: he says that to embrace the low status, simple child in his name is to embrace *God*. Whoever recognizes this and does it is on the way to true greatness.

- What does it mean to welcome someone “in [Jesus’s] name?” Does this verse/teaching mean the same thing as it would without the phrase “in my name?”
- How might you be called to welcome Jesus this week? Is there a “child” in your midst?

Kristen Gunn is a student at Nashotah House Theological Seminary, where she is happily plucking away at a Master of Theological Studies degree. A Houston native, she started reading C.S. Lewis and the Bible on her own in high school and has never been the same since. Before moving to Wisconsin, she earned a bachelor’s degree in religion and linguistics and taught English to refugees through an Episcopal fellows program in Dallas. She loves all kinds of water recreation, petting other people’s cats, and dancing in the patristics section of the library when she thinks she is alone.