

The Wise King: The Lord Weighs the Heart – August 30, 2015

Scripture: Proverbs 21:1-3 (2)

Unison: Psalm 84

Hymns: 1) #20 God of Abraham and Sarah 2) #28 For the Beauty of the Earth 3) #401 “O God in Whom All Life Begins”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!

People: To you our hearts sing for joy.

L: Happy are those who live and pray in your house.

P: Happy are those who find their strength in you.

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

Eternal God, there is none like you in heaven or on earth. If you will walk with us in faithful love, we will walk in your paths all the days of our lives. As you filled Solomon’s temple with your glory, fill our lives with your presence, so that we may live righteously and resist evil. In Jesus’ name we pray: “Our Father...”

THE SERMON

“All deeds are right in the eyes of the doer, but the LORD weighs the heart” (Prov 21:2)

When I was a seminarian, we’d read those good ole Puritan sermons where the preacher went for three hours on one sentence of the Bible, and I remember thinking, how could you make a whole sermon on one sentence? But this is one of those sentences. It is so true.

This is part of our continuing look at the wisdom statements of Solomon in the book of Proverbs.

“All deeds are right in the eyes of the doer”

We all bring our own perspective, shaped by our experiences, by what we have learned, by our prejudices and our blind spots.

We do things for our own reasons: Information we may have; ideas and concepts we subscribe to; the belief that we know what is right for the situation.

And, it’s part of the human condition to justify our selves. We create excuses, explanations, and back stories for several kinds of reasons:

To justify our decisions. There have been times when I've found more reasons the longer I've thought about a decision. Why am I still thinking about my decisions long after they've been made and acted on? That raises a second thing about those excuses and explanations...we do them:

To justify our actions. Sometimes we're seeking to avoid blame, from others, or from ourselves. In fact, more often from myself, if I'm honest! I'm my own worst critic, what about you? It's difficult to please that nagging voice in the head. And this relates to the third reason we devote so much energy, so much time, so many brain cells to explain ourselves to ourselves:

To make our choices fit more completely into our own viewpoint/worldview. There are times when what we choose doesn't seem to fit with what we think we should think and feel. Now there's an opportunity there, which I'll get to in a moment, but people often tie themselves into knots making what they've done and thought and said line up with what they feel they believe and stand for. Just look at any of the people running for President and you will see what I mean. They all do it....and I think that we are not being honest with our selves if we criticize then without looking at the ways we interpret and re-interpret our thoughts and actions.

We all do this. We are wired this way! To choose and then to act, to believe in what we are doing enough to get it done. We are wired to be social beings, concerned with the interactions we have with others. But in the midst of that, our choosing can become selfish. Directed at making things our way. Fulfilling our purposes. Structuring things so that at all times we can feel comfortable, in control, and RIGHT. When we become self-involved in this way, after awhile we lose the other-involvement that could give us perspective, and that could offer valid critique and important encouragement. In fact, we often attribute ideas and opinions to others that they may not have, except in our internal conversations! An example of this, where we really see this self-righteous self-justification and judgment coming out in our culture is the awful mess that most online comments—on blogs, on Facebook—become. That anonymity, and the voices running in our heads, can free something that should not be freed, and once it's let out of the barn, nobody even tries to chase it back in! I've seen comments followed by comments on the reply button where people are saying, "man, what are you saying? You're not like that!" But in the impersonal world of the internet, it's easy to let that internal dialogue take over.

What to do? Well, for starters, I have to say, except on rare occasions I have stopped reading comments on the internet. It takes a lot of time and it doesn't make me feel more charitable towards the human race!

For seconds, I think it's important to name those times where we are ashamed or unhappy with what we've said or done or thought—and ask ourselves, "wow, where did that come from?" It's

important to be honest about the ways that we assert our will over others, and the ways that we even make ourselves an “other” to be corrected or reinterpreted. But how?

Remember wisdom from mom: count to 10 before you speak. Create a little space. You know, that is a life saving strategy sometimes!

Spend time filling the mind with honesty and with things that feed the soul rather than beating it up and killing off all charity. You may need to change reading habits, TV viewing, internet trolling.

Also my mom on a bad day would say to teenaged me: “stop thinking about yourself so much and go help someone else!” That one really worked. In fact, that helping work was a first step into the path that brought me here!

But most importantly—and last for emphasis, not because it’s a lower priority: remember that you can hide from others, and you can hide from yourself...but you cannot hide from God. The Lord who is our creator can weigh what is in our hearts. Think about THAT!

But before you think, “ack!” how could I ever face God again, knowing that God knows all those internal things, the harsh thoughts, the ways I’ve fallen short,” remember this. God WEIGHS the heart. It’s not all bad things in there, not at all. And even in some of the most difficult struggles we have with our selves, God sees the intention that started the whole thing off. For the most part, if what Jesus said is true---and I completely believe it is---God is waiting and willing and eager to forgive us like the father of the prodigal son did in the parable. Like Jesus forgiving those who crucified him, saying: “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” God has seen our struggles. God has heard our fibs and our twists on the truth. God knows our whole story...better than we know it our selves.

And that, my dear church, is good news, really, really good news. This is what Paul means when he says we have ALL sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—a glory we aspire to. A glory that we contain in our souls, glory that is waiting to break forth. A glory that is our sustaining hope, a lot of the time. And, we DO NOT HAVE TO EARN IT because GOD HAS ALREADY PAID THE BILL, and installed the software in us! We just have to activate it, to click on the icon, so to speak. If we will look, we will discover our best self, waiting to come forth.

Solomon certainly knew this. And he struggled with it! The start of this passage compares the king’s will to a river being diverted for irrigation: God can bend the king’s will to do this. But not often without a fight, if the stories of the Bible are any indication. What might be some ways for us to work to discover our best self? Here are a few:

Mom was right about a lot of things. Go help someone, and don't feel you need to give a reason. You don't.

Feeling snarky? Another piece of mom advice: go outside! Go out into nature to remember how small you are, how big and beautiful the world is. And count to at least ten before you let those ideas out into the world. Another of her favorite sayings: "Remember, it doesn't cost you anything to be nice."

Caught up in an internal or external drama? Take a minute and imagine how it would play as a movie script. Comedy? Tragedy? Would you be the good guy or the misguided one or the bad guy? I have an alter ego, Rev. Crankypants. Sometimes she puts in an appearance, and when I realize she's taking over the internal dialogue, I make sure she gets a time out. With something to eat, a little nap, a quick walk around the block where I refuse to listen to her.

And again, last but really first: pray. Not the whiny demanding prayer, but the one that says, "God help me. Jesus, take this burden, I can't seem to carry it. Spirit, rise up in my soul while I just be quiet and calm for a little bit."

We were made by God to love one another. Sometime we forget that. We are in this life together, and our purpose here is to take care of one another. Sometimes we find that hard. We have been cherished and understood and forgiven by a God who loves us lots more than we love ourselves, whether we are lovable or not....by a God who is willing to love us into being better. By a God who gives us opportunities to love and care for others to spread the love, and to give us practice in this grace business.

In this passage Solomon goes on to say: "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice." God isn't grading us on how well we perform certain acts. This is not magic, where we seek to find the right words to conjure up God to support our own self-image. That was definitely an issue for Solomon as his life went on. But, no. It is not about what sacrifice we make. Not about our ability to justify what we thought, felt, did. It is not even about perfect practice of that law Jesus taught as supreme: love God with all your heart, mind, soul & strength and your neighbor as yourself. God welcomes imperfect practice and sincere effort to do these things. Serving God and God's purposes is about turning toward the light and letting God transform us. About doing works of justice and righteousness—works of love and care for others, even if they are not lovable or caring themselves. It is a wonderful thing. It is also, may I add, a difficult thing for us. It is difficult to get up and turn the throne of our souls over to God. It is a challenge to give up all those self justifications and explanations and all that self-righteousness for the opportunity to live life the way we were created to be.

This week why not try it? When you are tempted to explain yourself, don't go all long with it. If "I'm sorry" will do it, why say more? When you start in with the voice inside carrying

on a dialogue, let it go, give it to Jesus, gift wrapped if necessary! Let it go!! (no I will not sing it!). And open yourselves to what it is to truly live with justice and righteousness, guided by God.