

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost – Elizabeth Ahern

Proverbs 1:20-33, Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-8:1, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

In my son's bedroom there is a National Geographic poster of our galaxy—The Milky Way with its few hundred billions of stars. Perhaps you have seen the spiral-shaped system made up of constellations of stars and various planets. Our galaxy is so large that it takes 100,000 thousand years for light to travel from a star at one edge of the galaxy to the opposite side. Our solar system is about 2/3 out from the center and it looks tiny in relation to the rest of the galaxy. Within it there are all kinds of fascinating objects. Some of my favorites are the exotic kaleidoscopes produced by dying stars like Planetary Nebula M2-9. Even an ordinary star may eventually produce a nebula (a kaleidoscope) of exceptional magnificence. Do not worry; our star in our solar system that is about 4.6 billion years old is not dying yet; it is expected to live another five billion years. To look at the vastness inspires wonder and it is hard to escape a state of awe (amazement and reverence all at once).

In the Wisdom of Solomon (7:29) Wisdom is described as more beautiful than the sun (maybe even a dying sun, a nebula), and we are told that Wisdom excels every constellation of stars. Wisdom is also superior to the light itself. And guess what, God loves nothing so much as a person who lives with Wisdom.

You may be wondering if knowledge is enough; if you have knowledge, why do you need wisdom? **Knowledge** is really information about facts and ideas that we acquire through study, research, investigation, observation, or experience. **Wisdom** is understanding and application through the ability to discern and judge which aspects of that knowledge are true, right, lasting, and applicable to your life (Royale Scudery). In Hebrew and Christian traditions, Wisdom comes from God himself. Eugene Peterson says, "Wisdom is the biblical term for this on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven every-day living ... It is not just about getting people into heaven, but about living on this earth—living well, living in robust sanity." Peterson defines it as, "the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves. It has virtually nothing to do with information as such, with knowledge as such. A college degree is no certification of wisdom..." Yet the passage in Proverbs seems to tell us that Wisdom is available to anyone that pretty much wants it. Wisdom, in fact, is represented as one looking for recipients in the common places and spaces of streets and city squares, city entrances and busy corners. Wisdom even seems flustered with the lack of impact her marketing campaign is having, in 1:22: *How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?*

Have you ever felt this way? You may be surprised to hear that you are not the only one ever to be frustrated about people and their opposition to reasoning and their propensity for stupidity. Consider what some notables have said: "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former." (Albert Einstein) "Many people would sooner die than think. In fact, they do." (Bertrand Russell) "Just

think of how stupid the average person is, and then realize that half of them are even stupider.” (George Carlin)

Part of wisdom, which is living skillfully, is displayed in James. So what is this concerned pastor trying to tell the church by comparing the use of our tongues (in words we utter) to a small instrument that shapes the course of a large vessel, to a small spark that can set a whole forest on fire, and a beast that has never been tamed?

Words do matter and let’s remember that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Insolence in speech and attitude is pervasive in our current political sphere, at our places of work and in entertainment and social media. “Christian” institutions are not safe places either—it is hard to know whom to trust. As absurd as it is, people can find themselves targeted by disrespectful speech and/or behaviors at any moment for things like disability, age, height, hair texture, skin color, country of origin and much more. But we know that words when used well are powerful, constructive and can even bring healing. That is why it is important to listen and pray as we speak and demonstrate care in our word choices. It is no secret that our country right now seems to despise language. Eugene Peterson says, “We cannot be too careful about the words we use, we start out using them and they end up using us.”

Now let’s look at the Gospel of Mark. Do you think that Peter was careless with his words here? Let’s refresh our minds and recount what is happening. Jesus and his disciples are walking to the villages around Caesarea Philippi and as they go Jesus asks, *Who do people say that I am?* The disciples answer that some say John, some say Elijah and others say one of the prophets. Then Jesus asks them, *But who do you say that I am?* Peter answered: you are Christ, the Messiah. Since this was a teachable moment, Jesus started telling them about how the Son of Man would be arrested, rejected and killed only to rise from the dead three days later. Here is where Peter reacted in protest and Jesus rebukes Peter, expressing the familiar line—*Get behind me, Satan*. Some scholars call this passage pivotal because it focuses on the identity of Jesus, and it unfolds the process of perceiving and understanding that Jesus is the anointed one from God.

To be completely honest, it makes sense to me the way that Peter reacted. I can imagine Peter thinking, “Are you kidding me, Jesus, we are starting to get to know you and we love what we see (all the miracles we have witnessed and the care with which you pay attention to us and instruct us, even when we are lowly fisherman) and for the first time we have hope of redemption from our oppressors.” Remember that Peter and his companions have been under foreign occupation and the Romans are not necessarily looking for the best interest of their subjects and are definitely not fair. The Romans want all of the advantages for themselves, milking it as long and as hard as possible. Jesus as the Messiah is their only hope, and now he is supposed to die? “It is foolishness, it does not make sense, and we cannot let it happen.” Obviously, Peter did not know how God works, so Jesus asks Peter to get out of his way. In my view, Jesus is rebuking the temptation of wanting to save his own life when he said, *Get behind me, Satan*. Then he asks those who are his followers not to *run from suffering*, but *embrace it*. You may not

get everything you want, but you will not lose your soul—*your true self* (these phrases are from THE MESSAGE). Nothing is worth trading your soul.

In Psalm 19 (one of my favorites) we enter into a poetic journey in conversation with God. It points us first to the natural world and its witness of God with voices that we humans cannot hear, but clearly see in display, The Milky Way and its few hundred billion stars, day and night, 24/7. Our own sun is described as a vigorous bridegroom first coming out from his canopy and running its course without detours from east to west, while bathing everything along the way with its fervor.

Then, taking us into a celebration of God's law, instruction and word: *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.* To a great extent, those are the easier aspects of everyday living (no matter how frequently pursued)—to admire the awesomeness of creation and to celebrate the attributes of God's word and realize its benefits.

Next, the Psalm moves to a more down-to-earth and much more difficult part of everyday living. *But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.* It is harder to engage in reflection and to recognize the faults one commits, and much harder even is to do the work of sincere repentance, to follow up with restitution and to truly forgive those that offend us.

*Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.* The Psalmist is being practical here by asking for protection from the insolent (the unwise and ever-present disrespectful, who use careless words and behaviors to cause pain). Why might this be? What happens when you are disrespected with words or actions? You may become distracted from the sense of purpose that you once had—losing ground in your resilience and joy. This could lead to changing your patterns to become more like the insolent in the first place. If you play back in your mind over and over what the insolent have done, consciously or unconsciously, you may start acting in the same way, and become rude and disrespectful yourself. This is where the temptation to replicate behavior comes. I would just say, *Get behind me, Satan!* Losing your true self because of the insolent by keeping you from living in harmony with yourself, your fellow human beings and creation is a great loss. It is not worth it. It is better to pray, *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.* Amen!