18th Sunday after Pentecost

Prov. 8:22-36 Ps. 1 James 3:1-7a Mark 9:30-37

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Sep. 22, 2024

One of my favorite books is a small collection of wisdom sayings from Winnie the Pooh… A few of my favorite nuggets of wisdom in that collection being these:

Don't underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear and not bothering…

Those who are clever, who have Brain, never understand anything.

Spelling isn't everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn't count.

Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.

They each seem so simple. Some of them even make us chuckle… But if you were to take each of these wisdom sayings to heart, and tried to shape your day or your life around them, you would soon find yourself quite at odds in a culture like ours that values brains, and cleverness, and being busy, and being productive, and spelling Tuesday correctly, and obtaining knowledge exclusively from classrooms and computers rather than from the bottom rail of a bridge as the river below slips slowly away beneath you…

If the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh undermines and brings to question the wisdom of our culture (as well as much of the wisdom of world), then the wisdom Jesus tries to impart to his disciples in this morning's Gospel text intends to do the same as he foretells his impending suffering and death, and speaks about the greatest of all being the servant of all, and responds to the disciples' argument about which one of them was the greatest by taking a child in his arms and saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The thing is, the startling and unsettling wisdom this text from Mark tries to convey to its hearers is often missed, so tempting it is to make it into a cute little story about Jesus' love for children. But…

- if we pay attention to how Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death in the first part of this text undermines any hope and expectation the disciples might have had that Jesus would use success, power and prestige to usher in the kingdom of God…
- And if we really take to heart what Jesus means when he says that "greatness" in the kingdom of God comes by way of being "servant" of all (the word "servant" coming from the Greek word "diakonos," which in Jesus day would have meant someone on the bottom rung of the social ladder, often equated with those who served meals, and who were allowed to eat only after everyone else had eaten)…
- And if we realize that in the Roman Empire of the first century children were regarded as non-persons, possessions of the father of the household, with no more social standing than a servant…

Then we will see this text not as a saccharine scene in which Jesus coddles little children and welcomes them to Sunday School… "But," as one commentator on this passage has put it, we will see it "as a powerful and even shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God's will and reign, which confront the dominant values of human societies and assign worth and importance to every person."

It is most certainly a peculiar kind of "wisdom" that Mark invites his Gospel hearers and readers to see and to know and to live in and with and from… a kind of wisdom that turns the wisdom of the world on its head, and invites a whole different way of seeing and being…

(I mean to **see** that welcoming a child, among the lowliest of those on the social strata, is to welcome Jesus… is to welcome **God**… **However does one ever come to see such a thing? To believe such a thing? To live into and out of such a thing?)**

Not through "cleverness" or "brain power" certainly… Not through busyness or productivity… Not through the ability to spell Tuesday correctly…Not through the kind of learning that comes only by way of classrooms and computers… And I know this to be true because I've tried them all endlessly in my efforts to "understand" the faith I profess and confess…

And, truth be told, I'm trying them still, so ingrained in me is the world's kind of wisdom that tempts us to "think" our way, to "organize" our way, to "read and study and succeed" our way to faith, until we too have it all figured out, buttoned down, under control and nicely scheduled into our daily planners…

Those endless futile attempts I have made to deepen my faith and to expand my understanding of the will of God, the way of God, the wisdom of God by using the tools and techniques consistent with the

wisdom of the world, leading me to realize finally, that the wisdom Jesus invites us to "know" (not only in our heads, but also in our hearts and guts and bones), comes by way of a totally different…way…

Which is why, I think, just a few verses after Mark's Jesus uses a child to challenge the social hierarchy of the day, he gathers children to himself once again (much to the consternation of his disciples), and says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter it."

Jesus holds up "a little child" in this encounter with his disciples to indicate a way of seeing and being not dependent upon brain-power or will-power or organizational skills… And further raising the question for us of just how we might come to know the startling, paradoxical, and subversive kind of wisdom Jesus was always inviting his disciples to live in and with and from…

I don't really have a clear and articulate answer to this question… I only have a few "hints and guesses" that seem to have something to say in the mess and mystery of it all… Among them these…

There's the insight Karl Barth, one of the most respected and renown theologians of the 20th century shared one day when asked what words he would most want spoken at his graveside service… And he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know."

And there's the night I was visiting a dying man at Eastern Maine Medical Center, and upon asking him if he would like me to pray for him, was surprised to hear him say, "Yes. Can you pray the only prayer I know? The one I prayed as a child that starts, "Now I lay me down to

sleep?" And so we prayed together, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to Keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

And there's the poem by Pat Schnieder called "Welcoming Angels," in which she says she's grown tired of disbelief, admitting that what once seemed brave now seems boring… And so, as she writes, she's in the process of welcoming back "old hymns, old songs"… welcoming back "all the music, the rhyme and rhythm"… welcoming back "angels and archangels"… welcoming back "early guesses at the name of things"… welcoming back "wings"…. Welcoming back the stories of her childhood faith, and ending her poem by welcoming, as she writes, *"Welcoming what is not my own: Glory on the top rung, coming down."*

And there's what happened to me in Bible study last Wednesday morning as Joan Maxwell led us in our third conversation about intercessory prayer… Joan inviting us first to close our eyes and imagine someone for whom we wanted to pray, and then to breathe in the concerns we have for this person and to breath out what we would most like for him or her to have by way of blessing or healing… Breathing in our concerns for them… breathing out what we would most hope for their healing and wholeness…

It was a fruitful exercise for me as I imagined one of my children about whom I worry with some regularity… An exercise I had no trouble doing, as I was sure I knew exactly what this child's "maladies" were and exactly what this child needed by way of healing or fixing…

Then Joan asked us to do the same exercise again, but this time to imagine Jesus standing behind us… each of us… to imagine Jesus, with

his hand upon our shoulder perhaps, or on our head, or just there, present, right behind us… And then again to breathe in the concerns we have for the person we prayed for before, but this time to imagine those concerns being taken in not only by ourselves, but also by Jesus… And the blessings breathed out upon the person for whom we're praying in the same way… as if Jesus was breathing out blessings through us…

Well, this one I had trouble with… I'm not used to imagining Jesus behind me, or putting his hand on my shoulder or my head…or breathing through me… And it didn't fit at all into my theological framework built so well on edifying theological tomes and respected Biblical commentaries and understandings of Jesus that keep him more socially and communally engaged than personally involved, with… me…

So I struggled with Joan's assignment for what felt to be a long time. But then, I gave in a bit… relaxed my resistance, and allowed Jesus to stand behind me… which he did, but only for a brief moment before another figure appeared behind him… a feminine figure, wearing a robe full of stars and moon, her arms reaching around Jesus… reaching around me… reaching around the child for whom I was praying… and saying, without uttering a word, "All will be well… For this child you love… Even if the wholeness for which you long for this child doesn't come… even if this child doesn't find the way to healing in this life, all will be well…"

Was it Lady Wisdom, the one who, as our text from Proverbs tells us, was present before the beginning of the earth? Was it Lady Wisdom enfolding Jesus, and the both of them enfolding me and the child I love in an embrace of love that felt cosmic in height and width and depth even as it felt focused on me, meant for me? me? Elaine? Was it Lady Wisdom? Was it God? I don't know…

I only know that I saw something with the eyes of my heart I had never seen before, or felt before… even with all my seminary training and endless study of the most highly respected theological writings… In that moment it was just me and my child and Jesus and endless all-embracing love…

While the temptation for me is to try to figure out what happened during that time of prayer, I won't… because I know it would be the "wisdom of the world" that would be tempting me to do so… To say a bunch of deeply spiritual things about it… To wax eloquent about it in my writing, making sure Wednesday is spelled correctly…

But I will say this… The experience gave me new eyes through which to see… a new heart through which to know… And somehow I feel like I can sing "Jesus loves me" again, and mean it… And I can pray "Now I lay me down to sleep," and mean it… And I can lay aside disbelief, which has often seemed brave and sophisticated, and instead welcome back angels and archangels and wings, and glory on the top wrung coming down, and mean it…

And I can begin to imagine the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Jesus, slowly undermining the wisdom of the world upon which I have so successfully built my life… I can imagine the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Jesus enfolding me in a love so real and deep and true it breaks me open, allowing me to begin to see the world through different eyes…

Where "cleverness" and "brain power," busyness and productivity, the kind of learning that comes only by way of classrooms and computers, all fade into the background, and in its place there is a table where all of God's children, all of God's creatures have a place set just for them… and servant love is seen as beautiful, and justice rolls down like an everlasting stream, and the lion lies with the lamb, and everyone

understands that it is in losing one's life that you find it, and no one gives a hoot if you can spell Tuesday correctly…

Can you imagine it?

If it's hard for you like it is for me, then, without my even understanding what it is I'm saying, I'll simply say, "let Jesus help you… because Jesus loves you, this I know."