

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (September 1, 2024) – Uncommon Wisdom: The Time of Singing Has Come

Fellowship—Snacks or a meal (10 minutes or more)

Gathering Time (5-10 Minutes) Divide the group into smaller groups of two or three people and ask them to share with their partners something about the first time they fell in love. How old were they? Who was the object of their affections? How did it feel? How long did it last? What did they learn from it?

Group Dialogue (about 30 minutes). Read [Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#).

- The Preaching Notes point out both the vivid imagery and the invocation of the senses in this passage. Divide the group in half; ask one half to identify the many images used (and how) and the other half to focus on how the senses are engaged. Ask: “How do these approaches open up the passage for you?”
- The Song of Solomon is, at its heart, a love poem. Some scholars point to this book as an allegory of God’s love for humankind, while others celebrate the goodness of what God has created as expressed in our physical nature. Can both these approaches be valid? Does it matter to you which one is “right”? What place does scripture that refers to sexual desire and sexual goodness have in your own understanding of faith?
- Later New Testament writings, such as **James 1:27**, seem to divide the physical (things of the world) from the spiritual, so that an element of “true faith” is “keeping oneself unstained by the world.” Ask: How do you reconcile all of what God has created (physical and spiritual) in your faith and worldview?
- **Song 7:12** says, “The time of singing has come,” which might be more accurately translated as “the time of pruning.” In matters of the heart and in matters of the spirit, there is time for singing and time for pruning. What experiences have group members had in “singing” and “pruning”? How has that helped them grow?
- **Verses 8-13** suggest that the time for the Beloved is now, but that also implies that things happen in their own time. Discuss: In your spiritual journey, what experiences of “now” time or “not yet” time have influenced the path of that journey? How has “no” or “not yet” or “now” influenced your growth?

Prayer (5-10 minutes) Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes) End with this prayer, followed by the Lord’s Prayer:

Loving God, who has created us in all our physical and spiritual fullness, we give you thanks for showing us that love is possible and that love is good. We lift up to you the frailties that disrupt or corrupt our love for you and for one another and pray that you reform us in grace. We ask this in the name of Christ. Amen.

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (September 8, 2024) – Uncommon Wisdom: Choosing How We Should Live

Fellowship—Snacks or a meal (10 minutes or more)

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes) Ask participants to think of their favorite words of wisdom from a grandparent (or another wise person). Did that advice “stick” and become a life lesson? What were the consequences of ignoring that wisdom?

Group Dialogue (about 30 minutes). Read [Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23](#).

- Ask group members to think about any scriptures that tell us how to live. Challenge them to identify some from the Old and New Testaments (Ten Commandments, Beatitudes, and so on). Ask them to consider how “negotiable” these tenets are.
- The Proverbs are often presented as couplets; the two phrases may support each other, such as verse 1, or oppose each other, as in verses 8-9. What is the essential lesson in these verses? (If you have a large group, divide the entire chapter among them and list all the words of counsel.) How does heeding this counsel make someone “wise”?
- Proverbs’ “black-and-white” approach to advice seems to ignore the “gray” areas of life. In a complex society with complex issues, what value do these proverbs carry?
- Proverbs are written as by a mentor bringing up a student (son) to live righteously. They recognize people as wise (those who heed and learn), the foolish (those who do not heed or learn), and the simple (those who are unlearned). These categories are not age-dependent (sadly). How have you experienced being wise, foolish, and simple at different stages of life (perhaps all at the same stages of life)? What mentors, elders, teachers, or wise ones were there to help and guide? For whom are you a wise one?
- **Read James 2:1-17.** Review the warnings and advice from James. What is he telling the community about choices in how to live?
- **James 2** reflects on the inequities that are possible (even probable) between people of means and the poor. Everyone you know has both more and less than someone else, so “having means” is a relative term. If you are in a comfortable financial place, what obligation, if any, do you feel toward those who have less? How does that translate into how you vote? How you regard others? Where you choose to live? Where you invest your energy?
- **James 2:13** gives priority to “the law of liberty,” saying “mercy triumphs over judgment.” Discuss how difficult (or easy) that is to apply in practical terms, such as deciding if a released prisoner is hired, a halfway house is built in your neighborhood, people of different religions or cultures move nearby, a child gets into regular scrapes with the law; your spouse has a habit of lying to you and then apologizing, your boss regularly takes credit for your ideas and work.

Prayer (5-10 minutes) Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes) End with this prayer, followed by the Lord’s Prayer:

Great God of Abundance, we thank you for the guidance we have from you and our wise ones in how to live justly and graciously. We pray that we may be good stewards of what we have from you and share those blessings with others; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (September 15, 2024) – Uncommon Wisdom: Holding onto Wisdom

Fellowship—Snacks or a meal (10 minutes or more)

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Right behavior is no guarantee of reward, but it assumes better consequences than wrong behavior. In pairs or threes, think about a time when right behavior was not sufficient for a hoped-for outcome. What happened? How did it feel?

Group Dialogue (about 30 minutes). Read [Proverbs 1:20-33](#).

- Wisdom is personified as a woman who raises a lament that though she has cried out publicly for all to hear, the simple ones ignore, the scoffers ridicule, and the fools resist. Recall the differentiation among these three from last week's lesson. How do we engage people to hold on to wisdom when they seem set against it?
- Wisdom is clear about the consequences of ignoring her right counsel. Look at the various images she uses to describe what happens to the foolish. What does she say? Is there any recourse? Does she give any encouragement if people change their ways?
- Life is not as simple as "the good benefit and the wicked suffer." Thinking back to the opening question, consider how you hold on to wisdom (or integrity or compassion or justice) when having the right attitude or behavior just doesn't seem to get you anywhere.
- **Read James 3:1-12.** In this passage, wisdom is linked to teachers who, though they may sin, are held to a higher standard because what comes out of one's mouth is what is most prone to sinfulness. Look especially at verses 8-12. What does it say about "the tongue"? Identify the "couplets" (such as bless and curse). How do we discern what is wise and good in the midst of gossip, lies, misinformation, slander, and misdirection?
- Many of the Wisdom sayings are dichotomous; that is, they posit issues as either/or; right/wrong; wise/foolish. Early Christian instructional materials spoke of The Two Ways (*The Didache*). In **Mark 8:34-38**, Jesus describes two ways: denying oneself to gain the kingdom or giving up one's life for the gospel to save it. Do you *really* have to give up your life to be saved? Is self-denial the only way to be a part of the kingdom? If an exact "one way or the other" approach is precisely what Jesus meant, what does that say about who is a legitimate follower and heir to the kingdom? If that isn't exactly what he meant, what do you think he did mean?

Prayer (5-10 minutes) Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes) End with this prayer, followed by the Lord's Prayer:

God of Wisdom and God of Power, grant us grace in this hour. Bring us into the fullness of your hope; fill us with right desire; tame our wayward tongues; and embolden us for self-sacrifice; for we ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (September 22, 2024) – Uncommon Wisdom: In Praise of Women Who Lead

Fellowship—Snacks or a meal (10 minutes or more)

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or threes, recall an experience you have had or learned about with someone you would regard as “street smart.” This wisdom doesn't come from books but from life experience. How was that “smartness” exhibited? Do you have your own sort of “street smarts”? Where and how does it serve you?

Group Dialogue (about 30 minutes). Read [Proverbs 31:10-31](#).

- Before the description, the first sentence asks, “A capable wife, who can find?” which suggests that this is an idealized portrayal. Divide into two groups. Have Group 1 skim through this passage and list all the **tasks** the capable wife performs. Have Group 2 list all the **attributes** of this wife. (Does anyone feel overwhelmed?) Notice also her rewards for this virtuous and busy life. How might we update this description for the twenty-first century?
- This wife is also a businesswoman, not unheard of in that era, but rare. Furthermore, we see an Old Testament allusion to women in leadership. How does her wisdom serve her in her business dealings? Looking beyond that, how does wisdom serve her in her marriage? In her motherhood? In her other relationships? How does this model leadership today in these areas?
- **James 3:13-18** speaks of two kinds of wisdom: “earthly” and “from above.” How are these differentiated? To what sorts of consequences does “earthly” wisdom point? Do you find that this would necessarily be true today? How realistic is “wisdom from above” in the pursuit of daily life? How valuable is it? Do you aspire to it?
- **James 4:7** is a proverbial comment: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” How would you define “the devil” in this context? In your context? Do you find that “the devil” gives up that easily? Does this proverb work for you?
- Holding together the wisdom from these two passages, as well as your observations about “street smarts,” what is the most practical word of advice for you? How does this advice lead you away from foolishness to wisdom?

Prayer (5-10 minutes) Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes) End with this prayer, followed by the Lord's Prayer:

Gracious God of our Foremothers, we give you thanks for the nurture, guidance, compassion, and care they have provided. As we work for a peaceable world, we pray that their example of devotion and persistence will inspire us to service and faithfulness in the world. Amen.

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year B (September 29, 2024) – Uncommon Wisdom: For Such a Time

Fellowship—Snacks or a meal (10 minutes or more)

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or threes, recall a time when something happened that was just the right thing at the right time. Do you (or did you) attribute this to good fortune? To coincidence? To God's action?

Group Dialogue (about 30 minutes). Read [Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 and 9:20-22](#).

- In this passage, Haman is caught in the deadly trap he has prepared for Mordecai, Esther's guardian. The groundwork of the story occurs in earlier chapters. Be prepared to summarize these main points for the group; or ask the group members to recall as much of the story as they can; or write out the salient events, one item to an index card, and have group members use them to build the storyline.

The Main Points:

The Jews are in subjugation to the Persians. Esther, a Jew, is beautiful, smart, discreet; and one of the king's harem. Queen Vashti defied the king, and he banished her. The king chose Esther from among the women in his harem to attend him; she found favor with him, and he made her queen without realizing she was Jewish. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, was a minor official in the court. He raised Esther as his own when she was orphaned. Mordecai overheard a covert plot to assassinate the king. He told Esther, and Esther reported it to the king, in Mordecai's name. The would-be assassins were executed, and this event was included in the king's annals. Meanwhile, Haman was elevated in the ranks of the king's court, and most people, except Mordecai, bowed down to him. Haman planned his revenge, not only on Mordecai, but on all Jews for this slight, and he planned to have them all executed by royal decree. Mordecai, though, was to be hanged on the special gallows Haman had built. Mordecai discovered this plot and asked Esther to intercede. For her to approach the king without invitation placed her in mortal danger, but Mordecai, pointing out her unique position and opportunity, said that perhaps she "had come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). She did intercede and saved Mordecai and all her people.

- It appears that the king has a habit of granting extravagant requests without considering the consequences. The first time, he agreed to have all the Jews executed. The second time, he decided to rescind his decree (and that didn't end well for Haman). From Esther's viewpoint, we see the juxtaposition of whimsy or carelessness with "just such a time" fortuitousness. Ask: "How does your viewpoint affect the notion of 'just such a time'?" Have you been on both sides—a windfall to you, but a disappointment to someone else, or vice versa? What happened? How did it feel?
- When "such a time" benefits us, we are more prone to assume that it's God's doing. How do you see God acting in the world? We may ask, "Why me?" when things are disappointing or contrary to our wishes, but do you ask, "Why me?" when something good happens?
- Haman plotted and schemed and manipulated, using his position to work out his deadly plans until it all fell apart, and he was hanged on the gallows he had specially built for Mordecai. We are taught that "God will out"; eventually God will make things right for the innocent. What is your experience with this? What is to be done while awaiting God's justice? How do you deal with the suffering of the innocent?
- This passage from Esther demonstrates that lying, manipulation, and other ungodly behavior will come to a bad end. This is echoed in a passage from last week's lesson, **James 4:2-3**: "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly...". By contrast, this passage from Esther, as well as **James 5:16b**: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective," asserts that right intervention is godly and successful. What makes a prayer "wrong" or "right"? What makes it powerful and effective? How can you tell?
- In **Esther 9:20-22**, we read about how the Jews established the custom of celebration for deliverance from enemies (The Feast of Purim). In **James 5:13-16**, we see recommendations for dealing with suffering (and joy). In groups of two or three, brainstorm a list of occasions for celebration, then create your own short liturgy for these. Invite each group to share their creation.

Prayer (5-10 minutes) Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes) End with this prayer, followed by the Lord's Prayer:

God of Grace and God of Power, you have formed us for this hour. We pray that we will embrace the challenges that you place before us, striving to do your will in all things. Amen.

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