

Yeah, but. . . .

Prayer

I've been standing in pulpits most Sunday mornings for the last twenty five more or less years, and its only been in the last 3-4 years that I have done any preaching at all from the psalms, and this is the first time to sermonically deal with the psalm appointed for this morning, psalm 49. You have already discovered it to be different from many of the psalms we have prayed. This psalm is not a prayer. It is full of good advice, full of wisdom. Indeed 7, perhaps 9 of the 150 in our Bibles are classified as "wisdom psalms." You'll notice in the bulletin that our "stage directions" invite us to "read the psalm" with a learner's heart, rather than our more usual, "praying the psalms" inviting an attitude of prayer

What is the psalmist inviting us to learn? He works hard to have us understand that he is speaking to all people, "all you nations, all you who live on earth, great and small, rich and poor together." And he wants to speak with his whole person, "my mouth shall speak wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be understanding."

Now wisdom and understanding are often held in contrast in ancient wisdom literature, much as heart knowledge is held in contrast to head knowledge. For our purposes this morning, let's just say that wisdom is good. Very, very good. And understanding is wisdom seasoned with deep compassion.

And his point? He wanted his readers, and today that's us, to understand that wealth does not convey eternal life, that the wealthy do not merit special respect. He reminds us that indeed the wealthy will die as well as the impoverished. In common English he observed, we all put our pants on one leg at a time, and, none us of get to take it with us. As others have put it, life has a perfect mortality rate. But, while death is the great equalizer, the psalmist also reminds and assures us, the power

of God is greater than the power of death. God will hold our lives in God's loving hands.

And the gospel lesson? We can easily see that today's lesson comes in two parts.

The first begins with the request, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" which earns the retort from Jesus, "Not my job!"

Suspecting that greed lay behind the request, Jesus then told the crowd the story of the rich fool. That parable is nothing more than the message of psalm 49 in story form, we all put our pants on one leg at a time, and none of us get to take it with us. Life does indeed have a perfect mortality rate.

To this point, there is no news in these texts. Reminders of these truths are as old as time, and surround us on every side. Scholars, artists, and nature itself tells us such things whether we want to listen or not. The grass indeed withers and the flowers always fade. The question is, "what do we do with this information?"

Then Jesus went on, speaking not to the crowd, but to his disciples:
22-24 He continued this subject with his disciples. "Don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

25-28 "Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can't even do that, why fuss at all? Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don't fuss with their appearance—but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

29-32 “What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way God works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You’ll find all your everyday human needs and concerns will be met. Don’t be afraid of missing out. You’re my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

33-34 “Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can’t go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It’s obvious, isn’t it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be.

[“The Message” by Eugene Peterson]

Now I’m sure we’ve all heard this story before. I suspect part of us responds, “I know, I get it.” “Seek God’s realm first and all these will be added to it.” That calm, “I get it,” lasts at least until the rent or mortgage comes due, or the bill for this semester’s tuition arrives, or it’s time to meet the payroll, or the orthodontist’s bill arrives. Then, that all too familiar, “Yeah, but . . .” rears its head.

The world around us is no help, for we immersed in an economy which is as the commentator put it, “an economy that exists not to meet people’s needs, but to stimulate our greed.” [“The New Interpreters Bible”, Vol. ? (Psalms), Reflection on Psalm 49] You do not need me to share illustrations of this truth. Simply turn on the TV, wait 5 minutes, and some advertisement will do the illustration for me. We not only live in an economy that stimulates need, much of the culture around us is dedicated to raising not only our fear, but feeding our personal and social anxieties around the question of “enough.”

Are we good enough, strong enough, rich enough, powerful enough, smart enough, tough enough, good looking enough. Do we smell good enough? Do we have enough?

I find it fascinating that the culture, as expressed in advertising, entertainment, and the news never asks the following “enough” questions. Are we gentle enough, kind enough, patient enough, generous enough, loving enough? Do we give enough?

Let me ask - where in your life do you experience abundance? Wasn't it just last week that Rich Beebe told us of the needs in the food pantry? How many of us have an abundance of plastic and paper grocery bags? Surely we can share those.

How many of us have an abundance of time? Surely we can share a couple of hours to lend a pair of hands to the regular food pantry team since the need is so high.

Friends, we can always share out of the abundance in our lives.

We can always share a kind word and a generous smile as we walk across a parking lot or stand in a line.

Friends, we can always place a call or write an email in support of a ministry or a cause that contributes to the kingdom of God.

We can always offer a prayer on behalf of a friend in need.

Such are the things we can do to seek first the kingdom of God. When we discover and share our abundance somehow worries diminish, gratitude grows, and peace curls around us like a warm prayer shawl.

Let's try it. I believe we'll like it.

Amen