Sermon "Unconventional Wisdom"
Scripture Readings: Proverbs 1:20-23, 28-33, Mark 8:26-38
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Today's first scripture reading is Proverbs 1, selected verses beginning at verse 20. Wisdom, who is always portrayed in the feminine, carries Yahweh's message into the very heart of the city where the people live. Wisdom mourns their blindness and deafness, their "being simple," "scoffing," and "hating knowledge." Behind this language, according to James Newsome, is the deeply held conviction of Israel's wisdom teachers that a gracious God has placed at the disposal of men and women the ability to understand what God wants them both to be and to do. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof…

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices. For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease without dread of disaster. Amen.

Our second scripture is Mark 8:26-38. The disciples in today's gospel reading are asked who they think Jesus is as they begin their journey together toward Jerusalem. The importance of this encounter at Caesarea Philippi cannot be overstated. The geographic setting fits the function of the text. From this location in the foothills of Mount Hermon the view of the south stretches across Galilee toward Jerusalem. Jesus invites his disciples to look back across the Galilean ministry, to reflect on who Jesus is, and to understand what lies ahead. They are surprised to hear that his way is the way of suffering and those who follow him must do so with courage and integrity. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Unconventional Wisdom"

The text: For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Mark 8:37

Let us pray: Holy God, thank you for the truth you lovingly teach us in Jesus of Nazareth. Give us the courage to heed the unconventional wisdom he shared at Caesarea Philippi about life and about you. Amen.

The Empty Pot, by Demi, a children's book based on an ancient Chinese folktale, calls out from the busy streets not unlike Wisdom in Proverbs one. The story reminds us that hard work, honesty and integrity, doing the best with what we are given in life, is the wisdom of the ancient prophets and all God really expects from each of us.

The Emperor in Demi's folktale selects his successor by giving each of the children a seed who are invited to present the flowers they grow with the seed they are given. Most of the children, when their seed does not grow, rather than heed the reproof of wisdom, replace it with one that does. The lovely flowers the children present expose their dishonesty, disrespect, complacency and simple lives to the emperor. When the one presents an empty pot after diligently planting, watering and replanting the seed he received, they scoff him, mocking the truth he presents. The turning point in this folktale is when one learns it was impossible for the emperor's seeds to grow because they had been cooked. The young boy who appeared before the emperor with the empty truth is chosen for his hard work, honesty, and integrity.

Sometimes, we find ourselves in a similar place, having given our best and still experiencing an emptiness…whether it's in a relationship or a dream, wish or success that will not be fulfilled. We are tempted to fill the void with half-truths or untruths rather than accept the loss and disappointment life sometimes offers us.

Jesus teaches his disciples about the empty truth we are all called to accept in Mark 8 at a place called Caesarea Philippi. It is a turning point in Mark's gospel. The first seven chapters have focused on Jesus' public ministry in Galilee—emphasizing Jesus' power and authority. Now Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem and faces the suffering in his own life. Jesus embraces the suffering that is his as the Messiah.

Peter and the others do not want to hear what Jesus has to say or accept a Messiah who suffers. They want a Messiah who is "all powerful, above the fray of life and surely beyond suffering. Yet, what we learn from this Messiah is that he is not only subject to the terrible forces that afflict us in this life, he anticipates the brutal reality of tribulation and declares his commitment to experience it." *(The Rev. Dr. Lamar Williamson)*

Jesus invites us to follow in his way. He wants us to know that if we are faithful to God's call to do our best and be true to who we are, there will be pain, disappointment, and suffering in our life. Rather than try to run from it, Jesus calls us to accept it, embrace it, to find healing and hope by accepting the empty pot life sometimes offers. Unconventional wisdom, yes, and yet it is at the heart of our faith.

This turning point in Mark's gospel begins and concludes with stories about Jesus' healing two blind men. In the first, there are two stages to the man's healing. He sees a little at first and, then after Jesus lays his hands upon him a second time, sight is restored. This is not unlike the

disciples who have a partial vision of who Jesus is yet have not grasped the full picture of his Messiahship.

The invitation to follow Christ, first extended to Peter beside a sunny sea is now redefined in the shadow of a cross. Peter and the others are asked again now that they more fully see who Jesus is if they still want to follow.

Jesus Christ, the anointed one, our Messiah, offers us an empty cross and invites us to take up our own. It is part of the divine wisdom, that if we have the courage to endure and to accept our own suffering, we will find ourselves…and by being willing to enter the suffering of one another, those we love and those we do not know, we will find God. This is the unconventional wisdom, the paradox at the heart of our Christian faith.

Last Sunday evening as Peter and I were preparing dinner in our kitchen, we watched 60 Minutes…a ritual we enjoy together following a full day at church. A segment on 9/11 led the hour in anticipation of the twenty-third anniversary of this tragic day in American history. Scott Pelley spoke with firefighters who were there and the loved ones of those who never made it home. 343 members of New York's Fire Department perished while trying to rescue people trapped in the World Trade Center. The courage and integrity of the ordinary men and women who used their trade, their skill and their knowledge, and who risked their lives to safe others brought tears to my eyes. When tragedy happened, they chose honor and duty, they did the best with what they had. They embraced the emptiness before them, accepting their own anguish by entering the suffering of others. The stories of the children who have chosen to become firefighters as a way to honor the memory of their loved ones who died that day were tender, truthful, and heartwarming. As I considered the courage and integrity of these firefighters, I wondered how we have come to where we are today with such vitriol, scoffing, blaming, and lack of truth and wisdom in the politics of our country and the world.

We teach our children the stories of Jesus as they grow up in this congregation, yet what it true for each of us is true for them: our character and integrity are shaped during the defining moments on our personal journeys when we are asked to be true to ourselves in adversity, to hold on to what is right, and to risk suffering and sacrifice on behalf of other. By the grace of God, may we choose courage, truth telling, and the unconventional wisdom of our faith. Amen