

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Proverbs 1:20-33

²⁰ Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. ²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ²² "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? ²³ Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you. ²⁴ Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, ²⁵ and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, ²⁶ I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, ²⁷ when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. ²⁸ Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. ²⁹ Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, ³⁰ would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, ³¹ therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices. ³² For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; ³³ but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

Commentary

In the Bible, divine speech usually is reserved for God or an authorized male intermediary; but in Proverbs, God's wisdom is personified as a woman who speaks with divine authority. This figure has such great power that to disregard her teaching is to court folly and death. In our verses, Wisdom seeks young men where they live and asks: How long will you stay simple, scoffing, and foolish? *Simple* means "untutored, but capable of learning." Wisdom warns the young men that because they didn't respond to her calls, she will not answer theirs. It sounds simple enough: Follow Wisdom and avoid things that our outside God's boundaries. However, to ensure life and prevent evil, societies legalize many things and make others off-limits. We then sometimes call these things human laws and taboos "divine." We confuse God's boundaries with societies' limits. Thus, we must diligently search for what is truly outside God's boundaries and those things that are truly divinely ordained.

Reflection

Why do we sometimes confuse society's boundaries with God's limits? What are some examples of this problem that we have experienced within our daily living? What steps might we take individually and as a church to avoid confusing these two kinds of boundaries?

James 3:1-12

^{3:1} Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine of figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Commentary

James warns teachers about misusing speech, a warning that can also be applied to those who shape the theological language of faith. He notes that we all make mistakes, and that humans are free to choose the good. We can use our tongues to bless or curse, but the righteous choose to use their speech for blessing. Genesis says the world was created by divine speech and God's first gift to humanity was the power to name, create language and give meaning. This is an intensely powerful gift! And the real danger lies not in our occasional angry words, incidental curses or petty bits of slander, but in our tendency to create distorted worlds of meaning that suppress truth and destroy life. We distort truth if we offer rigid doctrine and biblical interpretations that isolate God's word from the movement of the Spirit in contemporary life. As believers, we are called to pay attention to and nurture the language of faith. We are called to keep it fresh, open, and inviting to welcome all of God's people into a relationship with God.

Reflection

How is the tongue double-edged? How does it relate to James' warning against being double-minded? What issues of religious language most concern you?

Mark 8:27-38

^{8:27} 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?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ Then he 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. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ 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." ³⁴ He 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Commentary

The Hebrew word mashiah (messiah) is the same as the Greek word christos (Christ). Both literally mean "anointed one." In Jesus' time, various kings, prophets and priests were called "messiah," which indicated that they were anointed by God to accomplish a task for God's people. After the exile, the Jews looked for a Davidic messiah that would be their future king. Peter may have used "messiah" to describe Jesus as an anointed agent of God without meaning to imply that Jesus alone offered God's saving power. The distinctive Christian claim that Jesus was God's ultimate saving power may have come only after the first Easter. Jesus taught the crowd as well as His disciples what it meant to be his followers. They must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him.

Reflection

What meanings did "messiah" carry in Jesus' day? After Peter called Jesus "Messiah," how did Jesus define it? How is suffering different from unavoidable pain and discomfort?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 19

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² **Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

**4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.**

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

**5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.**

**6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.**

**7 The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;**

**8 the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;**

**9 the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.**

**10 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

**11 Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.**

**12 But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.**

**13 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.**

**14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.