

SERMON

STARTERS

Wayne A. Beatty

August 3, 2003 8th Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12
Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

Prayers for Mercy

One passage today is Psalm 51:1-12. This is a well-known Psalm of confession and contains a significant prayer for mercy. It is often associated with Ash Wednesday, but it also has special relevance on this day due to the way that it has traditionally been associated with David's confession after Nathan had confronted him with his sin with Bathsheba and the previous killing of her husband Uriah in battle, but largely as a result of King David's command. The David and Uriah story is in the passage from 2 Samuel 11, also in this week's lectionary. One strong sermon possibility could link the two passages and develop a message on "Healing Our Memories." The preacher could note how even we Christian people sometimes feel very much disheartened by what we or others have done or have not done. God calls us to wholeness, however, and that can and should mean much in people's lives. We do fail, too often, but the journey to true Christian wholeness means very much in how we live our lives, and a message on this could very profitably emerge from a reflection on sin and mercy and the story of King David and the Psalm.



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August 10, 2003 9th Sunday after Pentecost

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33;
Psalm 130 Ephesians 4:25—5:2;
John 6:35, 41-51

Dealing with Grief

The lessons today lend themselves especially to preaching on how we deal with grief and loss and as Christian believers should deal with those experiences. It is appropriate for preachers to deal with this topic in Sunday morning sermons and even a series of sermon on occasion rather than doing so only through funeral orations. The passage from 2nd Samuel is the sad story of the death of David's son Absalom, including how he caught his head in the branches of an oak tree and was later killed by the army commander, Joab. This passage comes out of a much more complex story in which the father and the son are not on the same side in a battle. It would be very appropriate in any sermon on this passage also to quote the lamentation to be found later in the book, specifically David's anguished, fatherly lament: "O my son Absalom... would I had died instead of you...." So many important possibilities for preaching occur here, including the many times that parents must lament the loss of one or more of their children, and the very real tragedies which may emerge from so many conflicts. Dealing with honest feelings of grief needs to be faced in a healthy Christian life. Psalm 130 is a great psalm on this theme also, because it is the great Psalm of lament: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD...."

The Gospel reading from John offers positive suggestions for how we relate to God and affirm our Christian faith in many ways, including grief and loss. Jesus contrasts himself as the living bread come down from heaven with the manna which came down in the wilderness, yet as he said, those men who ate the manna died. The person who eats the bread of life will live forever.

August 17, 2003 10th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Living Wisely

Living and working as persons of wisdom is one theme which leaps out of several of today's passages (or "emerges" if you prefer to be more dignified). The 1 Kings passages tells the story of King David's deathbed charge to his son, Solomon, who will soon become King, and it later tells about Solomon's prayer to God for wisdom, from which he gets his reputation. It would be easy for almost all of us to "pray for wisdom" at various times, so this prayer is an important one, and it may also be worth reflecting on Solomon's reputation for wisdom, both positively and negatively—how far it went and how limited it was by the end of his life. A person can start out in their adult life by being genuinely wise, but may later lose touch with that "wisdom" as power and wealth corrupt. In fact, those who selected this lectionary text omitted verses 5-9, perhaps partly because it includes the portion of David's charge to Solomon in which he urges him to get revenge for something, and getting revenge is not something that preachers should encourage their congregations to do.

Ephesians adds to the other biblical words about wisdom. Paul appeals to the Ephesians to "walk ...as wise [persons]," and he advises them not to get drunk with wine, but "be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart." This could add much to a sermon on wisdom, particularly by developing a sermon on being "filled with the Spirit," expressing joy in the Lord, and living a holy life.

August 24, 2003
11th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 8: (1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43;
Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20;
John 6:56-69

Church Life and the Bread of Life

The Gospel passage from John contains many of Jesus' words about the Bread of Life and about the response of His disciples to what He is saying. He notes that this is a "hard saying." One theme which emerges is that it is the spirit which gives life, and that "the flesh," earthly matters, do not "avail." If the preacher has been working on a series of sermons on the Bread of Life theme, as could have been the case for the last several weeks, today's passage may move in a new direction, getting down to the basics of the spiritual life. This has many possibilities for reflections on life in the Church, and on the proper activities of the Church and of church people, so long as one does not get too bound up in the earthly particulars of church life and organization.

Several other passages today provide potential background for developing a sermon on life in the church, including 1 Kings, which is an account of the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, with Solomon's prayer of dedication, Psalm 84, which is a lovely song praising Zion as the longed-for goal of the pilgrim, and even Ephesians, which contains Paul's final charge to the church at Ephesus, from prison, and has the topic of God's armor and the Christian's warfare.

August 31, 2003
12th Sunday after Pentecost

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm
45:1-2, 6-9 James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-
8, 14-15, 21-23

True Worship

The passages for today have much to say about genuine worship—worship of God if one wishes to put it that way or "holy living" if one wants to do a better job of saying it. James 1:17-27 communicates the message that true worship is to live holy lives, to "be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving your-

selves." If one is still thinking about the "hard sayings" from last week, one might think this week about "hard usage" or something like that, because actually living the Christian life day by day and doing so in both one's work and one's leisure are very difficult to do, genuinely "hard" for most people to do—particularly at certain times in one's life.

The preacher could move farther in the direction of suggesting what true worship is and is not by exploring Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, which contains Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees, wherein they charged His disciples with eating from unwashed vessels. That charge prompted Jesus to issue his teaching that whatever goes into a person cannot defile him or her, but what comes out is what can defile a person. This is an important Christian principle which presses all of us to be more genuine and caring in what we do and say.

September 7, 2003
13th Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23;
Psalms 125 or Psalm 124
James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17;
Mark 7:24-37

Be Opened!

There may be many ways to communicate the challenge to Christian people to "be opened." This phrase comes from one translation of Jesus' command to the man who was both deaf and had an impediment of speech in the passage from Mark 7. He said "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened," and this quickly led to the man's healing. It can also become healing for each of us at certain times, either spiritually or physically. Jesus healed the man who was deaf and had an impediment of speech. This is the Gospel story. Proverbs 22 contains wise sayings concerning one's life and conduct, such as "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches..." It lifts up justice and generosity to those in need, and thus it fits in very well with the challenge to Christians to "be opened." One could easily preach on "A Good Name over Great Riches," and one could do that either in connection with the Proverbs passage or the Ephesians passage. Even the passage from James today emphasizes the respect due the poor, with strong warning against

showing partiality to rich persons over poor. That message is every bit as important today inside the church as outside.

In a more personal way, we can say that even today, Jesus' command to people lost in despair, people who are lost in what they see as the darkness of their lives, and particularly to people convinced of their own sinfulness is "Be opened!" Be opened to God, be opened to Jesus Christ, be opened to the work of the Holy Spirit, be opened to God's forgiving and healing powers whenever one repents and begins to change one's life in the direction of God.

September 14, 2003
14th Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Wisdom and the Glory of God

The Proverbs passage is a Hymn to Wisdom, which can be interpreted as a suggestion that it is wise to respond to God's call in one's life. In preaching, one could elaborate on this and suggest a greater openness to the wide varieties of genuine "calls" from God in different Christian lives. In the Proverbs passage, Wisdom is personified as a prophetess. She cries aloud in the street, and denounces those who despise moral instruction, and who will realize their need for wisdom when it is too late. The preacher could preach this, proclaiming "Wisdom Cries Aloud!"

Psalm 19 is a Hymn to God as Creator and Giver of the Law. This passage provides six synonyms for the Law, and concludes with the prayer to "clear thou me from hidden faults," a prayer that is appropriate for all of us at various times, and this might fit well into a sermon on Wisdom. The first verse would even be a good place to start in proclaiming God's glory in all creation, possibly using some speculations or scientific evidence from astronomy or physics—evidence of the grandeur of the universe which points to God.

The passage from James cautions us against unruly behavior and points to the dangers of the human tongue. From the tongue come both blessings and cursing. The Gospel from Mark is Peter's Confession that Jesus is the Christ, then Jesus' teaching about his coming suffer-

ing, then Peter's rebuke of him for saying this, and Jesus saying to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" This passage could also point to Wisdom in Jesus Christ and the fullness of what that means to us.

September 21, 2003 **15th Sunday after Pentecost**

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1
James 3:13--4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Wisdom and Good Living

The passage from James today provides an excellent description of true wisdom, the wisdom that comes from above. As the writer puts it in the NRSV, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." The preacher could do much on this passage, perhaps using the theme, "The Art of Living Well" or something like that. Proverbs, where so much of the "wisdom" content has come from in recent lectionary readings, could be dangerous today if pushed too far and in the old "traditional" direction, although if well done a sermon on this passage might push Christian people in a more holistic direction, because it is the famous, traditional description of a "virtuous woman" or "capable wife" in more modern translations. So much of the time in the past all this has meant is that the women should be subservient to men, but one could push this theme today in a more honest Christian direction, dealing with both the misunderstandings and the promising statements in this passage.

The Gospel passage from Mark contains Jesus' teaching to his disciples about "true greatness": "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We all need to learn more about this at various stages of our lives, and doing so would be a movement in the direction of "wisdom."