

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. I want to talk this morning about wisdom and as I was thinking about wisdom, a quote kept coming into my mind. "Wisdom is holding two contradictory truths in our mind, simultaneously, hope and despair."

I had to look where this quote came from and it's actually a line from the film, "First Reformed," written and directed by Paul Schrader. The line is given by Rev. Ernst Toller as he tries to console an environmental activist who is despairing about what is to come for the Earth due to climate change.

Throughout the film, the characters struggle with this, how to hold two contradictory truths in their minds. Despair and hope. Love and hatred. Humility and Boastfulness. I'm grateful to director, Paul Schrader, an episcopalian himself. While many of his characters fall deeper into confusion, despair, and hardship, one stands out for her wisdom and discernment. The pregnant mother, Mary Mensana, remains composed and determined through all the difficulties that she faces in life. It is no coincidence, I imagine, that she shares a name with the Mother of Christ and that her last name translated from Latin means "A Healthy Mind."

Two contradictory truth's side by side in our mind. To call back to the sermon we heard last week from Pastor Jaime, "it seems a bit *ridiculous*." Yet this phenomenon is true throughout the Bible and is evident in our Gospel text this morning.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God in two distinct ways: like yeast being kneaded in bread and like a mustard seed growing into a tree. Oftentimes, we think of these things in positive lights, the kingdom of God starts small like a tiny mustard seed or a small amount of yeast and grows into a strong tree or a delicious loaf of bread.

In Jesus' time though, this connotation may not have been so positive for those who heard it. A mustard seed growing into a tree meant that soon the whole area would be covered in mustard plants as they are extremely resilient. This meant taking up space where more important crops could be grown. Also, birds would be another problem in these fields as they scoop up and consume seeds meant not for food but for growing.

Yeast was often used as a metaphor for sin. In the Hebrew Bible, we see many instances where God commands the people of Israel to throw out and get rid of all the yeast they have and consume unleavened bread instead.

Why then, would Jesus compare the kingdom of God to yeast or the mustard seed? While this passage is contested by many scholars, I would posit that this is an example of Jesus breaking through the binaries of the world and demonstrating just how counterculture God's love is. In Jesus' ministry, how often did he dine with those that were seen as evil? How many times was Jesus at odds with those deemed the most Holy or righteous? The apple cart is being completely overturned.

Jesus lives into these contradictions and His life is perhaps the easiest example, both fully human and fully God. How can this be unless our whole understanding of what is possible is completely surpassed and transformed by God?

In Isaiah, the passage again demonstrates the God brings hope in the midst of utter despair. That no matter how lost the situation is, no matter how dry the desert is, no matter how remote the wilderness is, God brings life and love into those places as well. We are encouraged, as we look into the future for this promised deliverance and salvation to look back to Abraham and Sarah who were brought hope as well. Looking back to be reminded of what is to come.

It can feel like up is down, left is right, and all the ground we stand on is shaking. God's love is earth shattering, mind bending, and all encompassing. But where does that leave us?

Martin Luther throughout his writings, holds two seemingly paradoxical truths up. We are sinners and so we must be justified by faith thus we are made saints in Christ. Saint and Sinner, at the same time. In this Lenten season, when we reflect on our sins and the sins of the world, so often Christians have tried to measure their sin against another or proclaim their goodness over another. Instead, let this reflection not be a judgement of our own actions but a reflection on how we affect one another. This honest reflection can help us move forward, always with uncertainty, but more thoughtful on how impact one another.

Wisdom is the key to each step that we take on this journey. To examine the complexities that God has created and to recognize with humility we only capture a glimpse of the facets that God has designed. It is impossible to fully understand when we do good or when we do bad. We evaluate on our own understanding but God has a scope more than can be even described in words.

Yet these glimpses provide us with insight into what the kingdom of God can look like here on Earth. It is not constrained by arbitrary binaries but breathes with love and liberation. Wisdom leads us to understand the needs of one another, not to seek merely “fairness” only but to seek for a world where everyone’s needs are fully met. This is a complicated task for humans but we take it one day at a time, we look back for clues on how we can better serve one another in the future, and we ask God for guidance.

Guidance not on how expansive God’s love is, for we know the answer is past any limit we place on it, but on how we, despite our sinful nature, can best be God’s hands and feet in the world for others. THAT is real wisdom. To know that we can make a difference even when we also know we are limited by our own nature. To know God can use us despite our restraints and that God will empower us when we feel most hopeless. WISDOM can lead us forward even when we continue to be stuck in the limitations the world has convinced us that God has.

Next week, we will be following behind Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem, we will follow him to Golgotha on Good Friday, and follow Mary Magdalene on her way to the tomb on Easter. Today, let us follow Sophia. God, personified wisdom, given

the name and form of a woman in Proverbs. Let Sophia lead us and guide us to be discerning and prudent in our lives and in our search for justice. Let her enlighten those to the plight of the marginalized and guide us all to a more full and loving form of community, God's Kingdom on Earth.

As we pray now, I will pray use the words from Proverbs Chapter 8: 32-35, where Sophia talks about her role in Creation and our lives. "And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord." Amen.