### “You Judge with Mildness” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 23, 2023

**Wisdom of Solomon 12:15–19**

15You are righteous and you rule all things righteously, deeming it alien to your power to condemn anyone who does not deserve to be punished. 16 For your strength is the source of righteousness, and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all. 17 For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power, and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it. 18 Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness . . .

19 Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind.

**Mark 4:21–23, 26–28**

21 He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? 22For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. 23Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” . . .

26He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Welcome this morning to First Church. Let the warmth of this summer translate into warm hearts filled with the spiritual light of the gospel.

Today we will hear words of wisdom, words that revealed the nature of God to Hellenized Jewish readers, that is, Jews who could speak or read Greek, and then, secondly, words of wisdom spoken by God’s Son in the gospel.

Let’s start with the Wisdom of Solomon, a book of Hellenistic Jewish wisdom, combining the monotheism of Judaism with some of the philosophical themes and ideas of the Greeks, specifically the Stoics and Platonists. It was traditional in those times to attribute authorship of a book to a prominent figure of the past, in this case to Solomon, from many centuries earlier. When you have a moment, read this book. It is very engaging and uplifting.

Sometimes, the Wisdom of Solomon reads like an updated version of the Proverbs. Here, it affirms the goodness of God. In this passage, it says that, despite God’s great power and sovereignty, “you judge with mildness” (Wisdom 12:18). Remarkably, “you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind” (12:19). What a great affirmation! It takes nothing away from God’s supreme power and his right to judge arrogance, to rebuke insolence (12:17), yet it affirms his mild and kindly nature.

There is no hint here of an insecure monarch jealously guarding his power or ready to lash out at challengers. History is full of such insecure *human* leaders. This passage pictures the kind and fatherly figure of God that will become familiar to us from the gospels. And it speaks to us about true *human* leadership. It is a lazy way, to be a ruler who is thoughtless and cruel to underlings. It takes a great and courageous mind to rule with kindness. Consider the leaders of today by this rule. What category do they fit in?

Next, the gospel passage talks about putting one’s lamp on a lampstand where it may be seen, and promising that nothing is hidden that shall not be revealed (Mark 4:22). We trust that all truth will be revealed, and it is with faith that we trust that God is going to be truthful to us. He is a perfect Father who is patient, merciful, and kind, and leads us with his wisdom.

This section is then followed by a parable of the kingdom of God as something that grows, like wheat grows from a small stalk, to a bigger head, to the full blossom. One of the key aspects of this parable is the surprising element of unconsciousness. The farmer sows the seed, and goes to sleep. That is the first step. Then, the seed sprouts and grows, “he does not know how” (4:27). The farmer has to trust that grain will grow up.

I take this parable to be one of the most useful when it comes to understanding spiritual living. It is a growth process, and we allow the growth to happen but we don’t control it. It happens with our permission, but in fact, it grows while we sleep. The actual growth process is out of our control. We can’t micromanage it. We can take that first step and then trust the details to God that it will grow through stages until it reaches fruition.

So also with our spiritual growth. It will eventually produce fruit, but we have to be patient. Presumably we need to keep watering it with our spiritually-based actions, but it will grow on its own, bearing spiritual fruit.

Spiritual growth is something that happens beyond our control. Sometimes newly converted Christians get excited about the prospect of holiness, and try to make it happen quickly. But it is not done quickly, and the process may go in directions that we do not anticipate. I remember a young Christian, excited about his recent conversion, telling a congregation that he wanted to hear more praying in tongues. It seemed like a critical dig at some people, for not praying just the way he did. That is what I perceived, and I didn’t like it, even though I *did*, at that time, believe in praying in tongues. His words seemed to not coincide with the idea that the righteous must be kind, and not judgmental. They smelled of arrogance to me. I have learned that we cannot direct the method of someone else’s spirituality. Let each of us seek for and find God in our own way.

There is also a great proverb that affirms the kindness idea. It is Proverbs 21:21: “Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor.” It is like Jesus’ line “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt 5:6). Aspiring for goodness and kindness leads to fulfillment, a meaningful life, or, as Proverbs has it, life and honor. One might even go further and say that there is no real honor without kindness, no meaning without goodness. There is no high status without high kindness; no greatness without mildness. A person of high status but without kindness or understanding is a person to be avoided.

Stories about Jesus offer us some examples of kindness he practiced. The woman caught in adultery, who was about to be stoned, experienced Jesus’ kindness. The scribes and the Pharisees had taken hold of her and brought her to Jesus. They said “in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:5). They were hoping to put Jesus on the spot and get him in trouble somehow. If he let her go, he would be in breach of the law of Moses. If he ordered her killed, he would be in trouble with the Romans, who did not allow the Jews to practice the death penalty. But did they trap him?

He refused to be cornered in debate, but instead wrote something in the dust with his finger, then said “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (8:7), and again he wrote on the ground. We don’t know what he was writing, but it was evidently enough to embarrass the Pharisees, since they all “went away, one by one.” Left alone with the woman, Jesus says “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (8:9–10). And he ends with “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (8:11).

As is often the case with Jesus, he shows kindness and mercy without giving any instructions about reparation or purification, though he does tell the person to not sin. He doesn’t obsess with the issue, and he doesn’t issue any punishment. He did similarly with a lame man that he cured and told not to sin again (John 5:14) and with Zacchaeus the tax collector. He didn’t tell Zacchaeus not to sin, but it was Zacchaeus himself who admitted to having overtaxed people, and he himself decided on what reparation to give (Luke 19:8). Jesus simply lifted him up and called him a “son of Abraham” (19:9).

So God’s Son, Jesus, embodied the kindly and merciful God of whom the author of Wisdom wrote. The way he lived his life is an example to us. There is a good reason why God is inclined to be merciful: because we humans often, historically, have had so little to inspire us to toward goodness. As we have seen, a word of kindness from Jesus changed these people’s lives. As we follow the way of Jesus, we then set an example for others to follow.

In our world today, how many people are there now who never hear that word of kindness, never see a glimpse of God’s love? Maybe we can be the messenger of God’s mercy to some people who feel neglected, or who live in the drab darkness of isolation in what they think is a Godless universe. Some people need an act of kindness, or several, to activate their spiritual responses and persuade them to reorient themselves toward the Divine. Be a ray of light in the world, when you can. Be on the lookout for these opportunities.

This is *your* time to shine. You have a God-given light, a true gift from God. Do not hide it under a bushel but bring it forth, set it on the table and let it shine, for all to *see*.