

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
I KINGS 2:10-12; 3:3-14
PSALM 111
EPHESIANS 5:15-20
JOHN 6:51-58
August 18, 2024

A Wisdom Unlike Any Other!

Labels! Labels are wonderful guides, giving us directions, information, instruction, and the always necessary warnings, the skull and crossbones a classic example, a vivid reminder of the danger lurking inside. Labels allow us to eat safely, giving us insight into all the ingredients contained within a product, food allergy potential, and even the possible side effects an item might have on us. None of this comes as a surprise, nothing new here. Of course, we already know this to be so but is something we probably take for granted until some preacher chooses to use this information as a pathetic sermon introduction. Labels are roadmaps for living! And of course, labels aid us in helping to define our human characteristics. Used in a positive way labels serve to positively reinforce the attributes that define our being, whether inherent in our personhood, things such as being an introvert or extrovert, shy or social, or accolades attained through the due diligence of our hard work, describing our personal accomplishments. Indeed, labels can serve as a source of pride, appropriately so! And whether it be a business or a church, branding, a form of labeling, is a very necessary aspect of seeking a broad appeal to whatever audience might be targeted, a true marketing essential. Labels give definition, helping us hone a specific identity, defining the ethos of a given subject or entity.

But labels have a dark side, a demonic side to give the danger of labeling a negatively religious twist. Speaking of labeling, suggesting that anyone has demonic capacity foregoes the fact that every human being is created in the divine image. As Amy-Jill Levine notes in her new book, *Jesus for Everyone: Not Just Christians*, it is hard “to look at the face of someone tattooed with a swastika or spouting racist propaganda on social media and still see a divine image. But it is necessary, lest we turn people into demons. When we demonize, we lose a piece of our own humanity even as we grant those who promote bigotry a superhuman power.”¹ Something to consider! Labels have been used throughout human history to disrupt and divide, to separate and segregate, to create walls, barriers,

¹Amy-Jill Levine, *Jesus for Everyone: Not Just Christians* (HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, New York, NY, 2024), 25.

compartmentalizing some human beings from others. Labels have the evil capacity of diminishing the human spirit, to call attention in ways that are detrimental, damaging the psyche and even causing violence and bloodshed. Labels can wound emotionally, mentally, physically, and yes, spiritually. Labels can be damning, arrogant tools, that by design create airs of superiority and supremacy against the anxiety and fear that inferiority and insecurity bears in a vulnerably compromised person, and all at the same time. Even the strongest can be negatively impacted, injurious insults respecting no individual. Frequently, the goal, the subversive objective of the labeler, the name caller, is to establish an uncertain status, create a faux pecking order, a better-than based on different-than. And let us be honest, many labels are defamatory, based in lies, rumors, and innuendos, idol gossip, rooted in what is now called fake news, alternative facts. The outright level of fabricated nonsense in many accusatory remarks is quite simple, totally libelous, even slanderous, intentionally injurious to their core. If any of this stuff sounds familiar, resonates perfectly in your mind, echoing the toxic climate of our contemporary political, societal, and religious interactions, then you know exactly about that which I speak this morning. Perhaps, never before have we seen the likes of bullying, the level of name calling, and yes, derogatory labeling, as intentionally focused ways of trying to gain the upper hand, to exact some leverage, to get ahead of an adversary, used as a wedge issue to force an unfair advantage over an opponent, real or imagined. Words matter! Words can hurt! Damn that ridiculous sticks and stones rhyme!

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge! Fools despise wisdom and instruction . . . 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 will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? . . .’” (Proverbs 1:7; 20-22).

The early Church experienced the exact same kind of abusive practice, though the Romans employed name calling for a different reason, for a different outcome, though the similarities are striking, having the same offensive DNA. First of all, early Church constituents were accused of incest, an accusation based on the fact that these early followers of the way all referred to one another as brothers and sisters and greeted each other with a holy kiss as a part of their evolving worship practices. They celebrated an Agape Feast, yes, a love feast, that was misinterpreted, misrepresented, as, call it, an Agape fest, yes, you got it, an organized orgy masquerading as religious ritual. Secondly, the early Church was accused of atheism of all things. While this seems surprising, even shocking, to our sensibilities, the Roman deduction really was simple, the followers of Jesus refused to worship the numerous Roman gods and would not bend a knee, bowing to the Caesar in power, no liege, no lord, but Christ. Therefore, atheists! And finally, the early Church, these first followers of the way of Jesus who would become known as Christians, were bizarrely accused by Rome of cannibalism, “cannibal” a word that had not yet been invented. Yes, incest, atheism, and

cannibalism, what an odd trifecta, a strange trinity indeed! So why these accusations? What did these early disciples do to garner so much attention of the negative kind from their Roman occupiers, to gain such derogatory publicity, such unwanted notoriety, such outright disdain and hatred?

“Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand! In her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her! Those who hold her fast are called happy! The Lord by wisdom founded the earth . . .” (Proverbs 3:13-19a).

Well, when we peel back the onion, we discover the fallacy formulated in the arguments made by these Roman occupiers. All the accusations created by the Roman authorities were rooted in the false narrative of labels perpetuated by an imperial empire that had shifted its angry attention from the Jews to the Christians. Of course, all this propaganda was based in fabrications in every way, from every angle. Nothing like a false narrative to feed and fuel a captivating story! Quickly stated, these early believers were accused of cannibalism because of the Eucharist, this sacrament we call Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper. In our Witness from the Gospels in John we read where Jesus is quoted as having said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever . . . I assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the human one and drink his blood, you have no life in you . . . my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink . . . whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them . . .” Well, to the great unwashed, an uninformed outsider, at a minimum this probably sounds like the strangest lingo, a might off-putting, perceived as somewhat disgusting, an image that is gross to be perfectly honest! Imagine overhearing such bizarre conversations, such strange language. If the listener, eavesdropping as someone, or many individuals very well might have been, even spies perhaps, a very real possibility, easily interpreting these words, understanding these foreign terms to be literal expressions, well . . . Not to defend these horrific and false accusations, but knowing the way that gossip and rumors are started and inflamed, it is at least somewhat plausible, remotely understandable, how these wrongly interpreted notions gained traction, establishing firm footing among those who were already predisposed to being opposed to the new faith, adversaries of this new religious expression. Of course, factor in a clear agenda and we can connect the dots that led to the accusatory labels and the subsequent abuse that followed. As we know from history, untold numbers of the faithful would be martyred, would die horrific deaths as a direct result of these manufactured labels.

“My child, do not let these escape from your sight: keep sound wisdom and prudence, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way

securely and your foot will not stumble. If you sit down, you will not be afraid! When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught. Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it'—when you have it with you. Do not plan harm against your neighbor who lives trustingly beside you. Do not quarrel with anyone without cause when no harm has been done to you. Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways, for the perverse are an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in God's confidence . . . The wise will inherit honor, but stubborn fools, disgrace." (Proverbs 3:21-32; 35).

As we go about our daily business these days, it seems as if labeling of the worst kind has been taken to an art form, nasty names leveled at presumed and even real adversaries. Especially in recent years, it seems as if our political and societal climate has deteriorated to a point of no return, sides firmly entrenched, opinions intractable, viewpoints solidly galvanized, a dynamic that haunts the soul and kills the spirit, certainly always posing a real threat to bodily health. Everyone, no matter their stripe, is fair game! While this unfortunate trend, this kneejerk reactive tendency, is leveled from both sides, all sides, of the aisle, as we all know full well, painfully so, it is especially prevalent and prominent from one political perspective. These negative salvos hurled through the convenient means of readily available mainstream and social media have no good place to take us but only further serve to divide, to create chaos and conflict, including outright hostility, the very antithesis to hospitality. Round and round we seem to go and where we stop no one knows, no one has even a clue. It is as if we have gotten on a proverbial gerbil wheel and cannot see a way off, cannot find an off ramp. We all wonder where we are headed with this high level of toxicity that is poisoning the groundwater of every system imaginable, including this beloved Christian faith highlighted by the Jesus in whose footsteps we seek to follow. Threats of riots and even civil war are ominously wafting in the wind, unrest perhaps at an all-time high. The faith of our forebears is perhaps being threatened like never before, polluted by the advent of the scourge of what has been labeled as white Christian nationalism. Ironically, the seeds of this toxic movement were planted and can be traced to the emotional upheaval of the First and Second Great Awakenings in the vain attempts to restore the strident virtues of Puritanism. Echoes of this blight reared its ugly head again during the fundamentalist revivalism dominating the American religious landscape of the nineteenth century, was further codified by the Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable of the twentieth century, and now, in this twenty-first century, postmodern era, is blossoming in a most disgusting way in the hopes of returning the country to these prior mythical values. Of course, the planks establishing the so-called five fundamentals of fundamentalism were put in place as early as the my-way-or-the-highway theology that not only birthed supposedly irrefutable, inerrant and infallible, Bible, including a likewise inerrant and infallible Church doctrine formulated by the patriarchal hierarchy of the

ruling Church Fathers, provided the substance of material carefully crafted in the lockstep creeds spawned from the encyclical pronouncements arbitrarily made by Councils long, long ago. Out of date! Out of touch! Sometimes, out of mind! The mutation and metastasizing of this sectarian, cultic, movement that is quickly coming into focus and taking shape today before our very eyes in our very lifetimes is born of what once seemed an innocent but remains totally irrational fundamentalist dogma. These doctrinal requirements routinely professed as ultimate and irrefutable truth have only exacerbated suspicion down through the centuries while exacerbating the charges of heresy leveled against those who could not toe the line, could not embrace the Tradition, could not swallow the immovable teaching of the Church. As the late John Shelby Spong once opined with something to the affect, “The heart cannot embrace what the mind cannot accept!” **All this stuff is a lot to absorb, a lot to ponder!**

“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand! Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence! Acquire intelligence, you who lack it! Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right! For my mouth will utter truth . . . The Lord created me (wisdom, Sophia) at the beginning of God’s work, the first of God’s acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—when God had not yet made the earth and fields, of the world’s first bits of soil. When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep, when God assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress God’s command, when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside the Holy One, like a master worker! And I was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race. 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! But those who miss me injure themselves! All who hate me love death!”
(Proverbs 8:1-7a; 22-36).

Awareness of all these unfortunate and unhealthy trends demands that at the core of our being, individually and corporately, we become a resistance movement even if our opinion, our narrative, sadly becomes an outlier, one of a minority viewpoint. That being suggested, I still have hope for humanity, believing that the greater human good, our best selves, will survive the insanity, that our ideas of a socially just society, a better world, will never be suppressed or vanquished no matter who assumes power or for how long. Frankly, the

histrionics of the religious right are the final cries, the death rattle, the last gasp of a stifling inflexible narrowness, suffocating viewpoints already exposed in the light and the fresh air of the gospel, rendering the nonsense they spout as irrelevant, dead on arrival. The anonymous writer of Ephesians, leaning heavily on the ideas of the apostle Paul, reminds the church at Ephesus to live their lives wisely rather than foolishly. As if speaking to us in our contemporary settings today, the writer then admonishes the reader to **“Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times.”** To use the lyrics of a certain song, it is as if the writer is killing us softly with this song! These words certainly can be applied to our present circumstances and situations, to our contemporary, postmodern paradigm, history continuing to repeat itself as it always seems to do. Yes, the more things change the more they remain the same. This intuitive writer then says to this local church, **“Do not be ignorant!”** What salient words of advice! **Folks, ignorance is rampant in the living of these days, raging unabated as all of us live and move and have our being, and when ignorance reigns, people can fall for just about anything and usually do, yes, to misuse a phrase from Isaiah, the people perish. When ignorance is the order of the day, holding sway as reality, people get hurt, systems fail, civil discourse is numbed. The prophetic words from the book of Proverbs declare that wisdom is crying out in the streets, hoping someone is listening, an indication that wisdom was sorely lacking once upon a time, back in that day, just as it is in our time. In our climate today, surely, she, wisdom always expressed as feminine, is screaming at the top of her lungs, wisdom, Sophia, hoping against all odds, praying fervently that we will heed her words of warning and return to common sense, to a much, a desperately, needed civility, a tone worthy of the creations of God carefully crafted in the divine image, yes each and every one of us. The difference between wisdom and foolishness can be but a sliver or a great gulf but is the difference in how we choose to live our lives.**

“Wisdom has built her house! She has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals! She has mixed her wine! She has also set her table! She has sent out her servant girls! She calls from the highest places in town, ‘You that are simple, turn in here!’ To those without sense she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.’” (Proverbs 9:1-6).

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and longs for us, all of us, to gain the wisdom from above, shunning the foolishness of our worst devices. Amen and amen!