

Pentecost 20, Proper 25
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 26, 2014
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The Wise Life

Wisdom always seeks the widest possible context.

A man driving down I-25 stopped in San Antonio and had a Chili Cheese Burger at Buckhorn Burgers. Fighting back tears from the sear of the (mild) chili, he sauntered up to the cashier. Clearly, his \$800 cowboy boots were new, they had no scuffs or dust on them, and by the way he walked they hurt mighty bad. He tipped back his flawless Stetson, showing red marks where it bit into his head. He put on his best imitation of John Wayne and asked, "Where's the road to the Gila Cliff Dwellings?"

And she, in perfect form, responded, "You don't get there from here!"

Context, context, context, just like in real estate its location, location, location, in life it's context, context, context. Wisdom is known by the breadth of its context, and the greatest context is the mind of God.

The Scriptures can be understood as a guide to the greatest context. In it we can get a fix on what it means to be human, what existence is all about, and how to relate as a human to the ultimate meaning of life. Some of those lessons come through stories of how people did it badly. Some come through stories of how people did it well, and others, like this morning, just talk about a wise life.

The first lesson from Leviticus gives us the context of our human relationships. My brother-in-law Kim once lent a trailer of his to a friend. The friend took it on an extended trip to another state. First, he returned it late. Then, when it was returned it was really beat up. There were dents in the fender, dings in the railings and the tongue was bent. The best explanation that Kim could come up with was that he had jackknifed the trailer. Instead of fixing it or replacing it he had just dumped the mess back on Kim. Can you imagine how Kim felt about his so-called friend after that? There's a connection between the owner and the owned, the source and the result.

In the same way, the gift of family and friends comes from God, the source of all good. How we treat the people around us reflects how we treat God. The two relationships are linked. The author of Leviticus puts our relationships in the context of their Source. Wise living with one another involves knowing the greater context of human living. We are all created by God, we are all loved by God, we are all called back into the heart of

God. Live with one another as fellow pilgrims on the journey.

In the epistle lesson gives us the context for our relationship with life. A man who wakes up one morning to find a large rock in his front yard. Being a good Christian, the man decides to pray about it. In prayer he hears the Lord tell him to go push on the rock. He dutifully spends the day pushing on the rock. At the end of the day he collapses exhausted by his bed for his bedtime prayers. "Forgive me, Lord," he prays. "I pushed on the rock all day like you said and I wasn't able to push it even an inch. In fact, I see no evidence of having moved it at all!"

"That's OK," comes the reply. "Just do it again tomorrow."

Well, this pattern repeats itself for a month. Finally he sees that the rock has actually moved about a half inch. "I don't know if that's what you want, Lord, and at this rate it will take me about 40-'leven years to get it out of the yard, but I moved it."

And instead of the usual reply the Lord says, "You have been faithful, son. Now I want you to go look at yourself in the mirror. See what kind of physical condition you are in! The exercise has made you lose the extra pounds you have been trying to lose for years. It has strengthened your heart, given you muscle tone, definition and endurance. You're looking fine, my boy!"

Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica—he has nothing but praise for their faithful living. In this passage he almost crows: "My coming was not in vain," he exclaims, "For though it has been hard for you to follow Christ, what with the persecutions you have endured, yet you have stuck with it. You have come to see that in Christ your lives have a context greater than suffering." Paul puts suffering in its context for us all. Pain can destroy, but it can also build up. I saw a T-shirt once on an athlete that read, "Pain is weakness leaving the body." For the Thessalonians the pain of persecution had made them strong. This is the context of our suffering: In that, as Christ suffered and through his suffering redeemed us all, so our suffering can now be redemptive as well.

The Gospel reading sets the context for our relationship with God. The Sadducees had come to Jesus with one of their stock arguments. They were the ruling elite, conservative by nature and theology. They bucked no new-fangled innovation borrowed from the Greeks, the major one being life after death. They stuck to the ancient faith of the Hebrews that had no need for that. Morality was for this life and this life was all about your descendants. So live well so that your children can live well. That's how they read things. But Jesus had bested them with their own Scriptures showing how even the Old Testament saints continue to live on now.

There was little love lost between Sadducee and Pharisee, so now the Pharisees see a chance to score one over them. If they can best Jesus in a question about the law then they gain bragging rights over their rivals. They ask a lame question about the law. If they can get Jesus to give precedence to any one law over another they can challenge him on his reverence for Torah.

The first part of his answer is stock. It's the second half of the "Shema," the creed of the Jew: "Hear, o Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Jesus adds the second part, which is also reflected in Torah. And then he adds a most important comment: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This is the launching point from which you can properly interpret not only the rest of Torah, but the prophetic writings as well. This is the starting point for understanding humanity's relationship with God.

It all takes my mind to I John 4, vs. 8. Here the author claims that God is love, and those who love know God, and are born of God. Those who do not love do not know God. Jesus places love at the heart of the right relationship with God in this answer, because love is at the heart of the Godhead itself. God is love, unconditional, limitless, eternal and unfailing love. And we are created in, by and for love. To follow Torah, or to live according to God's will, or to become your own truest self, however you want to describe the purpose of human living, it has to do with a loving relationship with your Source, and a loving relationship with all that the Source surrounds you with.

The Pharisees' relationship with the Sadducees was hardly love. Jesus has gently and lovingly put the Pharisees in their place by laying out the foundation for a Christian approach to God, and all it took was placing their question in the largest possible context—that of the very heart of God!

So what is the greatest context for our living today? It's the same that Jesus gave the Pharisees. We are created in, by and for an unconditional love that is a mystery beyond our comprehension, but as Robert Browning, the English poet said, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" Though we cannot comprehend it, we can apprehend it, and begin the great journey of love back into the heart of our Source. Here are some ways that we make that journey:

We make it alone. No one walks your path, your path is yours uniquely. You alone have insights into the heart of God that no one else has, and no one else can share.

We walk it together. Though our paths are our own, they walk alongside one another,

little side-paths in the great path of all Creation. Others' paths hold wisdom you need.

It always requires the worst of us in exchange for the best in us. Death to the rule of the ego, dethroning of the imagined self, and enthronement of Spirit, the Spirit of God, who inspires our spirits. And this takes time.

So take time to be with yourself. Take time to be silent. Take time to decide slowly. Take time to sit in the anxiety of an ego losing control, to let the wisdom of the greater context surface as it will.

Take time to be with the community of faith; time to pray and worship, time to study and talk, time to listen, time to speak, time to let wisdom surface between us as it will.

Take time for eternity. Eternity breaks in on us when we least expect it. The veil is pulled aside and we discover that we are in the presence of profound truth, beauty or goodness. It is then that we see things aright,

Time for the greater context—herein is timeless wisdom. Knee-jerk reactions are rarely wise, quick fixes almost never fix anything. But God always shows up when we wait for the larger context to come clear.