

Open my lips, O Lord, that my mouth shall proclaim your praise. I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. *Amen.*

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Today as we come back from a long, dry summer to resume our Christian Formation program, these words from the Letter of James are a formidable reminder of the responsibility our teachers have agreed to take on. Today we will celebrate/have celebrated our return to learning about God in Christ with a brunch between services. Next Sunday at 9:30 classes will begin in the Parish House for students of all ages: classes for our children and young people and, for adults, either a bible study or inquirers classes. I want to publicly thank those who have agreed to teach these classes, and also remind you that although James tells us teachers will be judged with greater strictness, he continues by saying, “For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect...” Hopefully that takes some of the heat off our teachers, and the rest of us, too!

Many of you will remember when Christian Formation was called Sunday school, a label we’ve used so often and for so long that it’s hard to let go of it. In my own mind, I remember Sunday school classes at the Methodist Church my family attended. Hearing bible stories, memorizing bible verses, cookies and punch in Dixie Cups...you surely have your own memories. Sometime later Sunday school became known as Christian Education, inferring I believe that it wasn’t just a once a week opportunity. Now it’s called Christian Formation, and we’re having the same problem shifting from education to formation, mainly, I think, because we really don’t understand the difference or the reason why it should be different. Using the label “Christian formation” reminds us that “education” applies primarily to knowledge and “formation” more fully describes development. That’s what happens in the Parish House on Sunday mornings and every other time we gather as a community: whatever we are learning and doing together forms each of us to be the kind of followers Christ calls us to be.

Another way of looking at it is in the difference between knowledge and wisdom. When we go to school, as all of us have been required to do, some more recently than others, we gain knowledge that will help us in our lives. Knowledge implies information, understanding, and skills that we can readily use. Wisdom is different, though. Some folks are born with wisdom, but others may never claim it. All of us have known people who are intelligent and possess much knowledge, but seem to have no wisdom at all. Wisdom can be an innate gift, but it can also be developed through the practice of integrating our knowledge and experience, like learning from our mistakes or from the example of another. In the Episcopal Church, we rely heavily on the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason to provide us with wisdom in the practice of our faith.

Today in our passage from the Book of Proverbs, we see Wisdom, now with a capital “w,” in unexpected form, especially for Hebrew scripture. Often considered to be the spirit of God, here Wisdom is portrayed as a woman, a preacher, one who demands to be heard out in the streets and in the squares—that is, in the busyness of our lives. She’s kind of like the voice of our mothers, calling—maybe nagging—us to listen to her so she can tell us how to act, what to do, what to say, and also what not to say and do. And in the same ways that we don’t always appreciate what our mothers have had to say to us, we sometimes resist listening to Wisdom. But listening is the key to gaining wisdom. And in the Proverbs, listening is always linked to obedience. Wisdom says “Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

If we accept Wisdom as the spirit of God, listening is our response to God’s voice, and obeying is the way we build relationship with God. On Sunday mornings when we come together for worship, we

can hear God's voice in every part of our liturgy, in the lessons, in our prayers of intercession and thanksgiving and confession, and in the Eucharist. But through Wisdom, God is calling us to listen and obey all the time, not only on Sunday mornings, and how we do that is a byproduct of our faith formation. Faith is much more than belief, and practicing our faith is not something we can reserve only for specific days and times.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus first asks the disciples what others are saying about him. When he hears their answers, he asks them directly, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answers, apparently for all of them, "You are the Messiah." Hearing our Lord's question to his disciples calls us to think about our own answer to it. If we, like Peter, said to Jesus that he is the Messiah, Jesus would not be surprised, and would completely understand what we meant. At the time of his first coming, God's people were looking for someone to save them from Roman oppression and domination, and likely expected the Messiah to come armed and ready for battle. The disciples knew their Lord didn't fit that description; nonetheless, they believed he had been sent by God. They had full faith and confidence in the things he taught them and the hope he brought to them, and that is because they were closely bound to him, spiritually and in every other aspect of their lives.

So, what about us? How do *we* answer this centuries-old question from our Lord, "who do you say that I am?" There are lots of possibilities, of course: Lord, Savior, Master, Friend, Teacher, Prophet, Son of God, Redeemer, Exemplar... So let's look at it another way, in a way that might be more difficult for us. If someone asks, "who is Jesus?" how will you answer? Those titles I just threw at you would be meaningful to another believer, but probably not much to someone who was just learning about God. It's possible those titles don't mean much to us, either, unless they have been defined by our personal experience and our relationship with Jesus. That's why Christian Formation is so important, not only for children, but for adults as well. The depth of our wisdom about who Jesus is, and the way we describe him, come out of our formation. It's an ongoing process, not one that stops when we grow up, but one that deepens as we grow older, as we learn to rely more and more on him as the source of our comfort and also our strength.

Let's go back to our lesson from the Letter of James and his admonishment that not many of us should become teachers because we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. He may be right, but if he is, he's left something out, something important. And this is it: while we are not all specifically named as teachers, we *are* all teachers. In our words and actions, we're always teaching others what we believe of and about God in Christ. And we can only do that with God's help.

Let us pray.

God of all wisdom and knowledge, give your blessing and guidance to all who teach in your Church, both formally and informally, that by word and example they may lead those whom they teach to the knowledge and love of you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*