

“WE REMEMBER THEM,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 1, 2020

This morning our scripture lessons included a reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus. (*Apocrypha: Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15*) The passage read sings the praise of famous men. It is part of the Old Testament Apocrypha. This scriptural book is attributed to an author variously called Ecclesiasticus or, Jesus, Son of Sirbach. Written in Hebrew, the text is ancient, dating back to 180 B.C. But ancient Jews regarded this book as too new to be included in the official canon or collection of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, it was published along with the rest of the Old Testament as a kind of respected add-on. Today, Old Testament scholars regard the Book of Ecclesiasticus as part of the broader “wisdom literature” of Israel—in line with the Book of Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, and even the Book of Ecclesiastes which, despite a similar name, is by a completely different biblical author.

All in all, it’s not surprising that the Book of Ecclesiasticus should be grouped with the rest of Israel’s wisdom literature. Ecclesiasticus’ book constitutes a stirring elegy or testimony to those men who have boldly led lives of virtue and righteousness. At the same, these distinguished verses as read today are perhaps not as wise as they first seem. A second look reveals some problems. For instance, why doesn’t Ecclesiasticus acknowledge faithful, righteous women—as, for instance, the Old Testament Book of Proverbs does? (*Proverbs 31*) Shouldn’t we be singing their praises too? And also what about the “little guy” who never ends up “famous” before passing on to God? Doesn’t Ecclesiasticus believe that ordinary folks who have led thoroughly decent lives—but without acclaim in their own lifetimes—deserve equal remembrance and praise?

For us as Christians what Ecclesiasticus overlooks in handing out praise is no idle matter. Central to our Christian faith, transcending older “wisdom,” is a belief that God’s love embraces everyone who lives in him. That’s without regard to personal fame or even accomplishment. Indeed, if we are diligent students of scripture, we quickly come to see that our Christian New Testament almost turns the “wisdom” of Ecclesiasticus on its head. Emphasized in Christian scripture is God’s deep regard for the lowly—those whose names in our time never gets into the paper or on the television or video screen.

Take, for example, the wisdom of a second Jesus—the Jesus we know as Christ and our Savior. His wisdom is distilled and expressed in our second reading for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. (*Matthew 5:5-16*) In what has come to be called Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” he encourages all of his followers, however humble and impoverished, to find their dignity in the fact that they are “the salt of the earth” who need to keep their “saltiness.” (*Matthew 5:13*) Jesus further declares that the kingdom of heaven not only belongs to the “poor in spirit” who are having a tough time in life, but also “the meek” —

those not powerful. In fact, he insists that they, rather than the strong and the bold, will “inherit the earth.” (*Matthew 5: 3,5*) Conversely, Jesus goes on elsewhere to preach that it will be easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a tiny needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. (*Matthew 19:24*) Why? Because those who have so much now are often just full of themselves. In their arrogance, narcissism, and self-centeredness, they don’t really value God or make him the center of their personal universe as we all should.

Significantly, throughout his subsequent ministry, Jesus walks his talk. As we study the gospels we see him mostly hanging out with the poor and the outcast, rather than the accomplished and respected whom Ecclesiasticus chose to honor and celebrate. At Jesus’ hands, the folks treated as second-class citizens by everybody receive a first-class welcome. For instance in a culture that remains male-centric, Jesus invites women like Mary Magdalene and the sisters Mary and Martha to join his most intimate circle of disciples. Mary Magdalene even comes close to being anointed as a full-ledged apostle, receiving a direct commission from Jesus to share the word about his resurrection. (*John 20:11-18*) Jesus holds up for everyone’s praise the faithfulness and generosity of a poor widow who has only a couple of copper coins to contribute to the coffers of Jerusalem’s Great Temple. (*Mark 12:41-43*) Meanwhile, Jesus accepts hospitality from a repentant tax collector named Zacchaeus whom sophisticated Pharisees despise and dismiss as a Roman lackey and stooge. (*Luke 19:1-10*) Finally, on the cross on Calvary, Jesus speaks compassionately to a humbled criminal being crucified right alongside him. In words almost astonishing that underscore God’s inclusive forgiveness for the sincere and faithful, he proclaims to the thief: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (*Luke 23:43*)

At every turn, Christ’s message is emphatically clear. We don’t have to be powerful, super-accomplished, hyper-educated, or out-and-out famous to be somebody in God’s eyes and gain a place for ourselves in heaven. In fact, we don’t need to be anywhere near any of those things. What’s instead required on our part is humility, trust, and love as we walk with God every day. In the ultimate scheme of things, what matters rather than all our worldly business, is God’s greatness, not our own. Trusting in God means that we depend on him, rather than ourselves, for our vindication and salvation as men and women. And love for God and our fellow human beings, just as Jesus taught, is key to a decent and meaningful life now and, even more importantly, eternal life with God. (*Matthew 19:16-22; 1 John 4:7*)

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, which is frequently read at weddings, as well as funerals, the Apostle Paul hit the nail on the head. In a passage no doubt already familiar to you Paul declares: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I

am noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have and if I deliver my body to be burned [in sacrifice] but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 *Corinthians* 13:1-3) What profound and inspired testimony!

Significantly, Paul does not dismiss or deprecate the value of foresight, intelligence, or even religious devotion. He is simply saying that in God’s sight each of these talents, virtues, or accomplishments pale in importance next to our capacity for love and our commitment to be loving. Indeed, Paul’s advice is that nothing we do will ever get us very far in life or into the next unless we are motivated by love—a love for God and love for others. According to his apostolic teaching, then, the smallest deed that flows from love will always spiritually outshine the most magnificent human accomplishment pursued for the sake of self-interest and worldly acclaim.

Elsewhere in the very same letter to the Corinthians, Paul notes that what Jesus teaches us about the paramount importance of love, alongside trust and humility, may sound foolish to those caught up in the world and puffed up on themselves. But he notes that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 *Corinthians* 1:25) Consequently, Paul, who was once an arrogant, hate-filled, know-it-all persecuting Christians for a bounty, is now glad to call himself “a fool for Christ,” guided in all things by a spirit of love. Paul adds: “Let no one deceive themselves. If any one among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of the this world is folly wit God. For it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and gain, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.’ So let no one boast of men.” (1 *Corinthians* 3:18-21) For Paul, genuine wisdom only comes when we, setting greed and arrogance aside, humble ourselves before God and put our full trust in Jesus’ message about the fundamental importance about love for God and neighbor. This is the path to personal salvation—and the well-being of human society too. The only path. Yes, our only hope for any kind of decent, worthwhile life from here to eternity.

On this Totenfest or Memorial Sunday, we need to cherish this message of love’s centrality. As we remember those who have died over the past year, there’s a wonderful reassurance in it all. Specifically, the God to whom we entrust our own departed loved ones does not judge them according to some superficial list of worldly accomplishments. He does not care if they were renowned or powerful—or made a lot of money. Instead, God embraces them on the basis of how they have loved him in life and how they have each reached out in love to others when they had the opportunity to do so as wives, husbands, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, neighbors, and citizens. When all else turns

to dust, it is their loving ways that still count and assures them of a place in God's kingdom. Today, we memorialize family and friends by solemn word and song and prayer; by the lighting of candles and the ringing of a bell. Yet we truly honor the memory of our loved ones best by the way that we, in turn, make Christ's way of love our way of life, upholding their legacy and best example. May the day come when we too as loving, faithful people join them and Jesus and all the saints in their light. **Amen.**