***TOUGH LOVE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

September 16, 2018

Texts: Proverbs 1:20-33 and Matthew 7:24-29

The story is told of a young pastor who preached a very impressive sermon for a pastor nominating committee. The PNC was so impressed that they enthusiastically recommended calling him as pastor for their church, and the congregation approved. However, the committee’s enthusiasm was tempered somewhat when the young pastor arrived and preached the same impressive sermon on his first Sunday with his new congregation; the enthusiasm became concern when he preached the same sermon again the next week. After he preached the sermon for the third consecutive Sunday, the anxious leaders met with him to find out what was going on. The young pastor assured them that all was well. “I know what I’m doing,” he told them. “When you start living out this sermon, I’ll go on to my next one.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

That story brought to mind the comment of Phil Roberts who was the pastor here in the 1960s. When I arrived and asked if he would charge the congregation at my installation, he responded, “John, I’ll do whatever you want, but they didn’t listen to me when I was here, and I’m not sure why they’d listen to me now.” Lady Wisdom seems to share those sentiments; her voice echoes from the street corners and the city square in hopes that someone – anyone – might finally listen to her message:

*How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?*

*How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?*

Lady Wisdom cries out in the public square where everyone can hear her: busy shoppers and thriving merchants and gawking tourists alike. This is not some divine secret to be shared in whispers behind closed doors; it is wisdom for all to hear and heed. “Listen up! Pay attention! Hear ye, hear ye – the Word of the Lord!” she cries. Wisdom wants to be heard by all, not for her own sake, but for the sake of those to whom she speaks, for wisdom’s message offers the promise of comfort, security, and freedom from fear for those who will heed it. It is wise counsel she offers, a good word that may save the people a lot of heartache! Yet they turn a deaf ear to her and continue in their foolish ways. They ignore her advice and do the same dumb things again and again. “*O simple ones, how long will you love being simple?*” she wonders. “*How long will you refuse to heed my voice?*”

I doubt that those who heard her believed themselves simple at all. They had other sources of wisdom upon which to draw, other advice to follow in the choices they made. To whom did they turn if not to Lady Wisdom? The list was long and varied as it is today. They listened to politicians who told them what they wanted to hear; they embraced other gods who promised an easier road; they relied upon their education and the scholars who told them that information was all they needed to make wise decisions; they trusted their own insights without need for divine correction; they read self-help scrolls and listened to motivational speakers selling a prosperity gospel and believed knowledge to be the equal of any wisdom and were selective in the facts they chose to believe. They thought Lady Wisdom to be little more than a noisy annoyance, for they knew better, and so they ignored her cries – until calamity struck. Three thousand years later we are still repeating their mistakes.

Today we have more information available to us than at any other time in human history. We have smartphones, the internet, and a host of media options to inundate us with data, opinions, facts, and truths that are sometimes dismissed as false if they do not match our desired reality. In the words of one scholar: “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom…”[[2]](#endnote-2)

* A hurricane comes roaring in and while most folks evacuate ahead of the storm, a foolish few stay home to ride it out – until the wailing wind and rising waters imperil their lives, and then at the height of the storm they desperately call 911 for rescue.
* She had no time to wrestle with hard questions of faith or to pray or to read the Bible or to worship (except when the grandkids were singing) and life was just fine until a dire diagnosis suddenly evoked a torrent of prayers in search of an elusive God.
* He believed that Benjamin Franklin was right: “God helps them who help themselves” (which he was sure must be in the Bible someplace, which it isn’t) and so he helped himself and no one else, and then wondered why life had so little meaning, and in his own hour of need could find no one to whom he could turn.
* They say, *when you die you can’t take it with you*, but he planned to take it with him; when he asked Jesus what more he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to sell all he owned, give it to the poor, and follow him. That was the one thing he couldn’t do, and so he went away with a heavy heart, for says the text, “he had many possessions.”

*“O simple ones, how long will you love being simple*?”

There is a note of frustration in Wisdom’s words, frustration at being ignored as if her words are of so little value that they are not worth paying attention to, as if there were no consequence to turning a deaf ear to her voice. *But there are consequences*, she warns. You ignore Lady Wisdom at your peril. Do not think that you can ignore her now and then call upon her in a desperate moment. Do not think that you can let faith languish now and then rely upon it to sustain you when a crisis hits. Do not think that you can ignore God until your hour of need and then ring for God to rush to your aid like some kind of cosmic bellhop. Then it will be too late. “*Because I have called you and you refused to listen…I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock you when panic strikes*,” warns Lady Wisdom. This divine “I told you so!” is the warning of a heavenly parent who loves us enough to offer us wisdom for living and then grants us freedom to make mistakes. For some odd reason God decided that it was a good idea to give us free will and let us make choices. We can choose to listen to Lady Wisdom or ignore her, but we have to deal with the consequences of our choices, and sometimes the consequences of bad choices are dire or divinely laughable.

That doesn’t seem very Christian of Lady Wisdom – to laugh at our calamity just because we ignore her advice, to make us deal with the consequences of our bad choices, to allow us to suffer for our mistakes. What kind of loving God does that? Isn’t our God the One who is supposed to rescue us from peril and love us without end and always be ready to save us at a moment’s notice – the God who parted the Red Sea when the Egyptian army was bearing down on the Israelites, the God who provided manna and water in the wilderness, the God who welcomed the Prodigal Son home with open arms? Isn’t that our God?

The answer (as you might expect from an attorney) is both *yes* and *no*. *Yes*, our God is the One who saves us and loves us without end. *No*, that is not only who God is. Sometimes God’s love for us is the kind of tough love that lets us make choices, even if they are poor choices, knowing that we will suffer the consequences. Our God is the One who created us in God’s image and said, “Don’t eat the fruit of the tree!” but when Adam and Eve ate the fruit and lied about it they had to leave the garden; there are consequences to our choices! Our God is the One who welcomed the Prodigal home *after* he hit rock bottom as a result of his “dissolute living”. Our God is the One who says through Jesus, “If you would be my disciple then deny yourself, take up your cross each day, and follow me.” To be a child of God and disciple of Jesus is not a pain-free, consequence-free path. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now!

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells a parable about a wise man who built his house upon the rock and a foolish man who built upon the sand. When the storms hit and the floods rose and the wind blew, only the wise man’s house stood firm. “Those who hear my words and act on them are like the wise man who built upon the rock,” says Jesus. “Those who hear my words and do ***not*** act on them are like the foolish man who built upon the sand.” Both homes were hit by storms. The wise man anticipated the storm and built his house upon the rock and it survived, while the house built on sand was washed away. There are consequences to the choices we make! Jesus calls us to hear what he says but also to believe it and act on it – to love our neighbors and our enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive 70 times 7 times, be servants of all. He calls us not just to sit in the pew and hear a word from the Lord, but then to go into the world and live it; he calls us not only to say “I believe”, but to live as those who believe.

God does not promise us freedom from storms, hard falls, humbling failures or hard knocks. They will come, for God does not promise to make our lives perpetually easy, even when we follow faithfully. But God does offer us wisdom to avoid the pitfalls that plague us, faith to face with courage the falls and failures that inevitably come, and hope in the assurance that God is with us in all times and places, even in the eye of the storm. We choose – whether to embrace Lady Wisdom and Jesus’ way or whether to embrace some other way – and there are consequences to our choice. Choose wisely, he says. Choose wisely, for it really is that simple, O simple ones! Amen

1. “Hearing the Sermon Again”, *Our Daily Bread*, March 25, 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Edward O. Wilson quoted by William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, Oxford University Press: 2010, p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)