

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 20, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Proverbs 31:10–31

An excellent wife who can find?  
She is far more precious than jewels.  
The heart of her husband trusts in her,  
and he will have no lack of gain.  
She does him good, and not harm,  
all the days of her life.  
She seeks wool and flax,  
and works with willing hands.  
She is like the ships of the merchant;  
she brings her food from afar.  
She rises while it is yet night  
and provides food for her household  
and portions for her maidens.  
She considers a field and buys it;  
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.  
She dresses herself with strength  
and makes her arms strong.  
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.  
Her lamp does not go out at night.  
She puts her hands to the distaff,  
and her hands hold the spindle.  
She opens her hand to the poor  
and reaches out her hands to the needy.  
She is not afraid of snow for her household,  
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.  
She makes bed coverings for herself;  
her clothing is fine linen and purple.  
Her husband is known in the gates  
when he sits among the elders of the land.  
She makes linen garments and sells them;  
she delivers sashes to the merchant.  
Strength and dignity are her clothing,  
and she laughs at the time to come.  
She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household  
and does not eat the bread of idleness.  
Her children rise up and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praises her:  
“Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all.”  
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,  
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.  
Give her of the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the gates. (ESV)

## Second Reading

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

*You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

## Mark 9:30–37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

I can understand why someone, editing Proverbs, added this poem about the Woman of Substance as the latter frame to the book (chapters 1-9 being added at the same time to form a beginning frame). It is an alphabetic acrostic poem. (Each verse begins with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet.) It provides a sort of summary of the book’s appeal to seek Wisdom. Wisdom and the Good Wife constitute one pair, while Folly and the Strange Woman make up the other. Here, the Woman of Substance almost forges the first pair into a single, living embodiment of Wisdom.

This poem was probably written and added to Proverbs during the post-exilic period, while the Judahites lived in their home country, but under the rule of the Persians. It exhibits both literary and linguistic marks of that period. It also describes the life of an ideal, prosperous wife at that time. As such, it idealizes a life that is simply unavailable to the great majority of women at that time. Interestingly, her husband is portrayed as relatively idle, “sitting in the gates” with the elders, while she manages not just the household but his farms and businesses. She is far from a “Suzy Homemaker” wife.

I can understand why all of this contributed to the use of the poem Woman of Substance to conclude the book of Proverbs, but what baffles me is its inclusion in the lectionary. Had this lectionary been selected in the 19th century, I might understand it, but when we have choosers who will exclude a few verses that might be confusing or offensive (see our second reading!) why in the world would they include a text that sets up such a restrictive and unrealistic ideal? While it envisions her at work in the world, it is only in

service to her husband and his ownings. And even as it idealizes her in this role, it describes a role available only to a few. What of women whose husbands aren't wealthy enough to spend a day sitting in the gates? Who spend all day scraping together enough to see that their families are fed and clothed?

I'm only marginally sorry for ranting here, but sometimes, our lectionary choosers confound me.

## Second Reading

In last week's Divergence, I went down a "rabbit trail" in the comments on the selection from the Book of Wisdom. I discussed the way that desire for "Wisdom" (an aspect of God) supports my understanding that the Bible commends "desire for God" as an antidote for "mimetic rivalry" and the violence that it engenders. As I learned from Rene Girard, human desire is all imitative, or "mimetic." We learn what to desire by watching what others desire. Since we wind up wanting the same things, conflict inevitably ensues, and this conflict escalates until it threatens the very fabric of the social gathering. Last week, I talked about how imitating each others' desires for God doesn't lead us to that awful precipice, as there is always enough of God to go around.

This week, James says it for me. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions," and then, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

In a world with finite resources, but also a world where there is *enough*, shifting our desires to God seems to me to be the only way forward that does not require that some starve while others acquire too much. The wonderful thing about *desiring God*, is that, when our heart set on God, when we "draw near to God," God draws near to us, that is, we begin to have God's desires for ourselves and for others. James, for all his failure to grasp some of the beauty of the Gospel, still envisions a world in which desire for God yields the Kingdom.

## Gospel Text

Our reading this week from Mark includes two stories from a section of the Gospel sometimes called his "catchword composition." (9:33-50) This smaller unit lies within another unit sometimes called his "Discipleship Discourse." Given Mark's penchant for using "catchwords" (I used the term hook-words in my paper on Mark's chiasmic structure.) I find this unit intriguing. At some point I'll be doing a deeper study of the

catchword composition and perhaps the whole of the Discipleship Discourse, though I don't think the latter unit will hold up under scrutiny.

But it cannot be denied that discipleship takes a front seat beginning with Jesus' first foretelling of his death and resurrection and Peter's reaction. (See last week's Divergence.) Beginning in Mark 8, Peter functions as an example par excellence of the disciple who blunders badly and is still restored to meaningful discipleship. Last week Peter rebuked Jesus and received a public rebuke in return. But even in this rebuke, Jesus' command to "get behind me" echoes His earlier call, "follow after (behind, *opiso*) me." He is rebuked but placed immediately in his place as a follower of Jesus.

So this week we have a second prophecy concerning Jesus' crucifixion, but instead of Peter's rebuke we have the disciples arguing on "the way" about who will be greatest. This is the first of two such episodes (the other in chapter 10) and the shorter of the two. Though no one is named specifically, it is clear that the disciples have wandered from "the way" in their desire to be greatest. Jesus' response? Do not desire greatness, desire me. (See the Divergence on James, above.) Jesus has already foreshadowed Peter's denial in chapter 8, "Whoever is ashamed of me in this sinful generation..." Now he deals with the desire for position/glory. "Receive the least of these (the child). In doing so you receive me." This seems a contributor to James' assertion last week that favoring the wealthy is seeking wealth.

I would suggest that as we progress into the second half of Mark, two themes predominate. As the first half was concerned with the identity of Jesus and the building of tension between Him and the religious authorities, so the second half deals with the inevitable consequence of that tension (His death on the Cross) and the identity of a "disciple." Peter has been rebuked and restored. Soon we will encounter the rich young man who will begin his journey with Jesus by walking away sad (because he had great riches) and will conclude with his presence in the tomb, proclaiming Jesus' resurrection to the two women.

So this week's reading points to both those emphases, first Jesus predicts His death again, then He goes on to show the disciples what it means to be a disciple.