



Two little boys are playing in the basement. Noises begin to filter upstairs. Banging, crashing and maybe -just maybe- the sounds of a fight. Mom calls down from the top of the stairs: What's going on? There's dead silence and then "nothing." What's wrong? she asks. And after a bit of silence: "nothing."

Sound familiar? That "nothing" raises questions in us. It's never just nothing. It's always something. We've heard the banging and crashing. We think we've heard the sounds of a fight starting. But the answer that comes back is "nothing."

We don't want to admit that we were engaging in behavior that we knew wouldn't go over so well with the adults in the household. Maybe we're a bit ashamed because we know we shouldn't be fighting.

William Barclay writes:

Nothing so well shows how far the disciples were from realizing the real meaning of Jesus as today's Gospel passage does. Repeatedly Jesus had told them what awaited him in Jerusalem, and yet the disciples were still thinking of Kingdom in earthly terms and of themselves as his chief ministers of state. There is something heart-breaking in the thought of Jesus going towards a Cross and his disciples arguing about who would be greatest.<sup>1</sup>

In their heart of hearts they knew they were wrong. When Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about they had nothing to say. It was the silence of shame. The disciples had no defense. It is strange how a thing takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of Jesus. So long as the disciples thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be greatest seemed fair enough, but when that argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all its unworthiness.

If we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus it would make all the difference in the world. If of everything we did, we asked, "Could I go on doing this if Jesus was watching me?"; if of everything we said, we asked, "Could I go on talking like this if

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to William Barclay's Daily Study Bible (see [www.studylight.org](http://www.studylight.org)) Sept 19, 2015

Jesus was listening to me?" there would be many things which we would be saved from doing and saying. And the fact of Christian belief is that there is no "if" about it. All deeds are done, all words are spoken in the presence of Jesus. God keep us from the words and deeds which we would be ashamed that he should hear and see.

Jesus dealt with this very seriously. It says that Jesus sat down and called the Twelve to him. ... And then Jesus told them that if they sought for greatness in his Kingdom they must find it, not by being first but by being last, not by being masters but by being servants of all. It was not that Jesus abolished ambition. Rather Jesus recreated and sublimated ambition. For the ambition to rule, Jesus substituted the ambition to serve. For the ambition to have things done for us, Jesus substituted the ambition to do things for others.

The bottom line to the question then of the Mom calling down from the stairs or of Jesus is not "nothing" but rather, I've gotten sidetracked from doing what I know is right. From living my life in accordance with the model that Jesus sets for us.

The other readings for today flesh out the Gospel. Although Proverbs is couched in terms of what qualities make for a capable, virtuous, valiant wife, they can also be seen as the qualities of a disciple whether male or female. This passage is the last part of the Book of Proverbs and reflects the advice of King Lemuel's mother. She tells her son, the king who rules over others and thus should set an example to his subjects, that certain characteristics will be helpful to him. We don't know who King Lemuel is and so we can't really put him in context. However, we're told in chapter 1, verse 1 that the Book of Proverbs comes from Solomon and the text is intended to help us learn about wisdom, to gain insight and instruction in dealing in righteousness, justice and equity. In verse 7, chapter 1, we read: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." An acknowledgment that God is God and we are not. An acknowledgment that we need to live in ways that give glory to God who made us and who cares, deeply, about what we do with our lives.

Reading and further consideration suggests there is more than one way to understand this text. The value of struggling with a text is that sometimes there is light at the end of the tunnel. This text from Proverbs is multivalent- one of my favorite words. Multivalent: having multiple meanings or values.

First, in a bit of irony perhaps, this text in Hebrew is an acrostic. An acrostic is a type of puzzle where each line begins with the next letter in sequence. The first line in Hebrew begins with aleph ("A") and each subsequent line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. "A to Z" as it were. Thinking about it from a New Testament perspective, we might say the writer moves from the alpha to the omega.

Some writers suggest that the wife portrayed in this passage is not a single individual but rather a composite that presents the various skills and talents that are needed for a successful society.

Some writers suggest that we can consider the wife to be "the church" and not an individual. Christ is referred to as the head of the church and the church as Christ's bride. Using that

possibility then the mission of the church is to be and to do all the things set forth in this passage. Some writers suggest that when read closely the passage turns our common assumptions about women in a patriarchal society if not on its head at least turned sideways. That the wife portrayed is, in fact, the real power behind the husband.

Other writers suggest that the passage shows the inter-relationship of the husband and wife- each doing what they do best to further the household. This is the model of a life that God calls us to today.<sup>2</sup> David Grant Smith suggests that this passage shows a woman who stands outside the norms of her day- she uses her gifts and talents in ways that further her household.

The characteristics listed in this passage in Proverbs are ones that all of us, male and female, should think about. We are called to use our gifts and talents to help bring about the realm of God on earth. None has us has all of these attributes but each of us has something that can be used for the common good as we reach out to those in need in our communities. Each of us has something of value that can be used to create more healthy, loving and whole communities. As Barclay wrote: Jesus substituted the ambition to rule with the ambition to serve. Use your gifts and talents to help make a better world for all.

If you read history or follow current events, you may have wondered as I have where all the great public servants have gone. Why do we, by and large, seem not to have the type of political and other leaders that seemed to be in our American culture through at least World War II? Where are the Dean Acheson's, the George Marshall's, and the Mother Teresa's? Yes, we have a wonderful example currently in Pope Francis, but by and large it seems to me our current world landscape lacks the great humanitarians and political leaders that earlier century's can point to. Perhaps we, as a culture, have focused so much on the ambition to rule that those who have an ambition to serve have fallen by the wayside. I think our global situation would be different if we had more leaders who were called by an ambition to serve and not to rule. It is true that not all of us are called to act upon the world stage. However, we can make our local communities stronger and healthier when we operate from an ambition to serve rather than an ambition to rule. Making our local communities stronger and healthier may lead to making the next largest community healthier and stronger and so on – and perhaps one day our whole world can be healthier and stronger if we persist in living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

James continues the reflection on being wise and understanding by encouraging those who received his Letter to reflect upon what qualities and characteristics- in ourselves and in our faith communities- cause us to fall short of being the type of disciple Jesus envisioned. Scholars suggest that the Letter of James was written by James, the brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem, and secondly by someone who expanded upon the text later in the first century. The Letter was written and disseminated as Jewish Christians sought to understand their relationship and allegiance to the Torah and to Jesus, as Christ, crucified and risen. It is written, then, at a time of turmoil, not too unlike today. We are pulled and pushed by outside sources that encourage us to act in ways inconsistent with the Gospel. We are bombarded with media

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Telford Work, Kenneth Carter, Kathleen O'Connor and H. James Hopkins found in [Feasting on the Word](#), Year B, volume 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 74-79; to Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, [Preaching the Old Testament](#) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 185-186; and to David Grant Smith <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-09-23/proper-20> (September 22, 2012)

messages about how we ought to look and act and how we ought to spend our financial resources. Often, but not always, those messages are at odds with the Gospel message to love one another and to love God with all our heart. We can learn from James about how we can live in ways that are consistent with the values that God, through Jesus, sets forth. When we do that, when Jesus asks us: what are you talking about? What are you concerned about? The answer will not be “nothing” but rather “I am working to bring about the realm of God using the gifts and talents you have given me. I am working with my faith community to build up the kingdom of God on earth.”

The readings today follow on the questions of last week. Who do you say that I am? And then, “so what”? The readings today help us see that when we substitute the ambition to serve for the ambition to rule we can help bring about the realm of God on earth. We can live in ways that glorify God, the creator and ruler of us all. We can answer the question from Jesus, “what are you talking about” with something other than “nothing.” **Amen.**