



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “A WISE AND DISCERNING HEART”

Scripture Lessons: Ruth 3:1-13; Acts 16:16-34

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, May 12, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

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Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sometimes I feel like a young Howard Morgan, one of the four sons of the late Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, all of whom were preachers. The story goes that Howard was sitting with his family in a living room, and someone approached all of them and asked: "Who is the best preacher in your family?" Howard, who had great admiration for his father and his brothers, looked straight across the room at their guest, and, without a moment's hesitation, answered, "Well, Mother, of course!"

Over the years my own father has modeled for us children a similar kind of honoring of our mother...affirming who she is, acknowledging her love for our family...celebrating her words and her counsel. I have always respected how my father navigated that particular relationship with my mother and his role in our household. He did so in much the same way as a pedestrian at a crosswalk, in the sense that both are well within their rights to cross the busy street just so long as they don't try to confirm it (cf. George E. Bergman).

As I prepared this morning's sermon, I found myself thinking about what my mother taught us about "wisdom"...and what I kept coming back to was how, so often, she pointed us to wisdom's source.

I suppose it is an obvious lesson, yet it is one that we need to hear over and over and over again...that wisdom -- knowing the heart and mind of Christ and discerning that which is good and acceptable and holy -- ah, that kind of wisdom, from the outset, is none other than the work of God. And what we have been told and believe is that God can bring about wisdom whenever and wherever and through whomever God chooses, which is to say that wisdom doesn't start with us...at least not the kind of wisdom we are talking about this morning.

In the Book of James, we are provided a lovely description of Godly wisdom: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (James 3:17). In this way, "Godly" wisdom is very much a spiritual matter - a gift of grace, as it were; and it is a gift that allows us to see the world differently, to see through the lens of faith, and, quite frankly, to be better equipped for life.

Growing up in Charleston, the image of a hurricane resonates with me in this regard; because, when a hurricane is on its way...we do certain things, don't we? We take certain precautions...we board up our windows, and we stock up on milk and bread and toiletries. In some cases, we move to higher ground. And all of these kinds of steps are familiar, because that's what it means to be prepared.

In much the same way, in life, be they the kind of intense storms that would shake our foundation or simply the challenges that accompany the sunny days, life -- just life, intensifies our need for wisdom. And praise be to God, when life does happen, we will find that through our spiritual resources and guidance we receive from Bible reading and worship and prayer and

fellowship, we begin to see the storms for what they are, precisely because we know the One who can calm them.

Of course, Jesus is that One whom alone we love and serve and affirm as not only the greatest revelation of God's love – but also the greatest source of wisdom; and, I dare say, if we are to know anything about having a wise and discerning heart, it will be through the Holy Spirit's witness to the heart and mind of Christ. But so often we look for wisdom in other places, don't we? At times we function like educated derelicts, using wisdom in ways that we see fit...and we are not alone in these endeavors. Oftentimes people feed off of one another, and there emerges a kind of "group think," and, when that happens, there is indeed a mass in the Body of Christ, but it's not a good kind.

To be certain, it's not what we think, individually or collectively – it's not about our wisdom – it's about God's Word being operative in our lives, so that when those hurricane winds start to blow, we are not left to presume that it's just another great day to fly a kite; instead, we're better equipped to prepare, to be able to batten down our spiritual hatches. Because if we have lived at all, we know that those winds will blow from time to time, and when they do - when the rain falls, and the flood waters rise - if the foundation of our life is built upon the wisdom that we have created, that foundation is about as good as sand, because it won't endure for very long!

Mahatma Gandhi once spoke quite forcefully to Christians saying: "You Christians have in your keeping a document with enough dynamite in it to blow the whole of civilization to bits, to turn society upside down, to bring peace to this war torn world. But you read it as if it were just good literature, and nothing else."

It's interesting to think about what would happen if, with increasing regularity, we looked beyond ourselves - beyond the limits of our understanding? We would find that the Scriptures are so much more than a good read. We would find they are but in fact the very wellspring of good wisdom.

When Job experienced the limits of his understanding, when knowledge and wisdom exceeded his grasp, as it were, he was forced to concede that only God holds true wisdom saying: "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place," and lest we forget, God can place it anywhere!

I have always perceived Ruth to be a woman of great faith and fidelity, a woman who was as industrious as she was wise. What's more, she had a sense of direction and purpose when the circumstances in her life would have suggested otherwise. Her words to her mother-in-law, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God," they still resonate with us today!

But there's something else in particular that is quite fascinating about Ruth and it has to do with her place within God's story of salvation. And to begin, we would do well to remember these words from the Apostle Paul, what he said about his colleague in ministry, Timothy: "I am

reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.”

But rest assured that sort of thing would never had been said about Ruth, precisely because Ruth didn't benefit from that kind of multi-generational transmission of the faith, which was the case for Timothy. In fact, seeing as Ruth was a Moabite peasant-woman, she could rightly be considered an outsider in more ways than one. Yet nevertheless, in our Old Testament Lesson this morning, we see that God used even Ruth's voice to remind God's people of what God had already said to them in the Scriptures about the need for a relative of the deceased to marry his widow - in this case Ruth - so as to carry on the family name. And so here in Ruth 3 is the voice of a woman with no status whatsoever, hearkening God's people back to God's will and intention, and thus by God's grace, initiating a profound change in the heart of a man of Israel, whose name was Boaz, and she herself eventually becoming the great-grandmother, arguably of Israel's greatest king, King David.

In this morning's New Testament Lesson much the same thing happened - at least in terms of a very wise perception coming from an unexpected place. A slave girl notices Paul and his companions and declares: “these men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Now, I bring up those two stories because I find it wonderfully amazing that something about the nature of God's character - God's will and desire - that it can sometimes come to us from far beyond the “community of faith”...that sometimes a person like Ruth or a slave girl in the book of Acts – that someone we might consider to be an outsider, discerns more clearly and readily what the people of God should be doing than even the people of God. Though, clearly, not every demand placed upon God's people reflects Godly wisdom nor is every quote from the Scriptures a present spiritual mandate.

To put it another way, it is not enough to know what the Scriptures say – even Satan knows the words – we need to understand what the Bible means, because when that happens, we will begin to see more clearly that blessed consistency between the wisdom that God reveals to us today and the wisdom that God has revealed to us in the past. And lest we mistakenly presume, for example, an inconsistency perhaps in the sense that we no longer subscribe to ancient Levirate Marriage Law as was the case when Ruth lived, by turning to the Word of God, and here again by the inward witness of the Spirit, we will learn that Jesus, the one in whom the law and the prophets find their fulfilment – that He is the mediator of a better covenant – the greatest covenant - a covenant of grace.

Over the years, I have likened wisdom to a specific kind of oak tree, a “Live Oak.” The oldest one that I know of is called “Angel Oak” -- it's located over on John's Island. Some estimates put the tree near 1,500 years old. I wonder how many hurricanes it has withstood in its lifetime. Probably quite a few! But you know, there's a reason why we seldom see “Live Oaks” topple in hurricanes; there's a reason that they stand up so well to life's rough and enduring winds. I liken it to Godly wisdom in the life of God's children...for the taproot of ours goes deep into God's enduring and loving promises; indeed, the breadth and scope of God's Word is like an

expansive root system that not only goes deep, but it also goes wide, providing us with nourishment for each passing day and strength and stability in the storms of life.

Last week we referenced those words from the prophet Isaiah: “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). Of all the anecdotes and good advice that my mom gave me over the years -- of all the faithful wisdom that she transmitted to us as her children -- the greatest was born from an awareness that God is the source of wisdom...the source of life and love...and that God’s Word / God’s wisdom, it can be found right here...right here in what Gandhi considered to be a powder keg of potential, and indeed it is, for we know it to be the very Word of God.

Let us pray...

Gracious and Loving God, the Bible tells us that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” that we are faithful when we yearn for wisdom and instruction. Thank you this day for the wisdom we receive from you, and for such faithful insights shared with us by those we love. Especially this day, we are grateful for any loving wisdom with which you have blessed us in and through the lives of those who bear the title “mother.” In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*