

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 19, 2021
 First Lutheran Church
 St. Joseph, MO
 Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Many of us are probably familiar with John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. It is pretty standard fare for high school curricula, or at least it was when I was in high school. Some of us may know the source of Steinbeck's title for his novel. It is the line of a poem by Robert Burns:

*The best laid plans of mice and men
 often go awry.*

Burns' poem is an engaging study in itself. Its title is:

"To a Mouse.

On turning her up in her nest with the plough, November 1785."

Writing poetry did not produce enough income for Burns to live on, so, he sustained himself by farming. It was while plowing one late fall that he unearthed a mouse's nest, which became the inspiration for this poem. In contemplating the tragedy he imagined for this poor creature, Burns found a parallel for his own misfortunes.

*Wee, sleek, cowerin, timorous beast,
 O, what panic is in your breast!
 You need not start away so hasty
 With bickering brattle!
 I would be loath to run and chase thee,
 With murdering plough-staff.*

*I am truly sorry man's dominion
 Has broken Nature's social union,
 And justifies that ill opinion
 Which makes thee startle
 At me, thy poor, earth born companion
 And fellow mortal!*

The poet is truly heartbroken for the calamity he has brought upon this animal. As the mouse flees from him in terror, he sees in it yet another example of the enmity that often prevails in the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. The poem continues in profound empathy for the plight of a fellow creature.

*Thy wee-bit house, too, in ruin!
 It's silly walls the winds are strewin!
 And nothing, now, to build a new one,
 Of forage green!
 And bleak December's winds ensuin,
 Both bitter and keen!*

*Thou saw the fields laid bare and waste,
And weary winter comin fast,
And cozy here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel plough past
Out through thy cell.*

*That wee bit heap of leaves and stibble,
Has cost thee many a weary nibble!
Now thou are turned out, for all thy trouble,
Without house or hold,
To endure the winter's sleety dribble,
And hoar-frost cold.*

In her comfortable nest in the ground, the mouse may have thought she was well-prepared for the winter. But the sudden crash of the plow drastically changed her circumstances, making her survival now uncertain, to say the least. It is here the poet finds a parallel in his own life's journey.

*But Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes of mice and men
Go oft awry,
And leave us nought but grief and pain,
For promised joy!*

*Still thou are blest, compared with me!
The present only touches thee:
But oh! I backward cast my eye,
On prospects drear!
And forward, though I cannot see,
I guess and fear!*

The theme of wisdom runs through our scripture readings this morning. It is most directly stated in what we have before us in the letter of James:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

I like to think of Christian wisdom as applied theology. I use the term applied because wisdom is more than just knowing. Wisdom is also about doing—it is about applying what we know to our living. Wisdom, as the dictionary tells us, “is the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on such things as knowledge, experience, and understanding.” Wisdom, then, is about developing and following a plan—it is about developing and following a sound plan. But, as the poet reminds us, even the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. An unforeseen plow comes crashing through our living and drastically changes our

circumstances. It could be a devastating illness or a pandemic. It could be a hurricane, earthquake, wildfire or tornado. It could be the loss of a job, or the loss of a retirement fund. When the plow comes crashing through, what, then, of our wisdom? Was it really, as the poet says, at best just a guess, and is our only recourse, then, to live in fear?

The word of God to us, of course, is a resounding “No!” “No” to thinking fear is our only recourse. Whether it be from the lips of angels, or from the mouths of prophets, or from Jesus himself, God’s word to us is “Do not fear”—do not live your lives in fear. Live your lives in the wisdom of God. Live your lives trusting in the wisdom of God.

Perhaps at the heart of the matter is understanding what is truly “sound.” Wisdom “is the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action.” James tells us there are two kinds of wisdom. There is earthly wisdom, but then there is the wisdom of God—the wisdom that comes from above. Elsewhere in scripture we are told that human welfare, in fact, the welfare of all of creation, is the goal of such wisdom. The wisdom of God asks but one question: “What works for our good, and for the good of all?” James describes such a wisdom in this way:

It is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Jesus, in the gospel, shows us such wisdom by lifting up a child—by lifting up one of whom his society said had little value, had little to contribute to the good of the world, one who was viewed as weak and expendable. God’s wisdom, Jesus said, is to welcome and serve one such as this. In welcoming and serving the least and the smallest, we work for our own good and the good of all creation.

Shortly after writing *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck made the following entry in his personal journal:

In every bit of honest writing in the world there is a base theme: Try to understand each other. If you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing another person well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love.

This, I believe, reflects well the wisdom of God. This, I believe, reflects well the wisdom of Jesus. Even when our best laid plans fail us, even when our own wisdom fails us, we are called to put our faith and trust in the wisdom of God. Such a wisdom calls us to welcome and serve each other, especially the smallest and weakest in our midst. Such wisdom, in the end, truly works for our own good, and for the good of all.