

Wisdom and Innocence  
Proverbs 3:13-15/Matthew 10:5-16  
July 8, 2018  
Rev. Bob Griggs

The gospel injunction to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” reminds me of a wonderful story from the Sufi tradition:

Mulla Nasrudin used to stand in the street on market days, to be pointed out as an idiot.

Not matter how often people offered him a large and a small coin, he always chose the smaller piece.

One day a kindly man said to him:

“Mulla, you should take the bigger coin. Then you will have more money and people will no longer be able to make a laughing-stock of you.”

“That might be true,” said Nasrudin, “but if I always take the larger, people will stop offering me money to prove that I am more idiotic than they are. Then I would have no money at all.”

Personally, I find in this story a wonderful way to enhance my retirement income. But first, I want to ask if Mullah Nasrudin fits the gospel’s injunction to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Was he innocent? Well, the people who saw him in the market place certainly though so. They treated him as some kind of holy food and gave him their money so they could mock his lack of wisdom.

But was he wise? Well, he got people to give him money, and that’s not easy. He understood their desire to feel superior to him and cashed in on it. True, he took the smaller coins, but they never stopped coming.

We can make up our own minds about Mullah Nasrudin, but the story gives us some perspective on this morning's gospel. Jesus is sending out his disciples on a missionary journey and is giving them traveling instructions: where to go, where to stay, whom to see, what to take, and what not to take.

It's like the kind of list we make when we go on a trip, what our young people and I talked about. If you have any obsessive tendencies at all, they'll come out as you check and recheck that list. Did I really turn off the stove? We were rushing so much. Are you sure that you locked the front door?

When we were traveling with our kids, we always forgot something, but one thing we tried extra hard not to forget— we checked and double checked — were trip presents. If our kids were good the previous day, the next day of the trip started with us giving them each a present. In other words, it was a bribe. Over time, this morphed from a gift for being good to an entitlement. Once we actually did forget; there was a riot in the back of the car, and we never forgot again.

Well, our children are grown up now. Still we can be driving with one of them somewhere, and suddenly he'll grin and blurt out, "Trip present." "Where's my trip present?" I still feel like I'm supposed to come up with something.

Be all that as it may, and no matter how good a list maker you might be, the truth is that you can't anticipate every possibility. So in the end, when the unexpected comes up, you need some kind of general principle or rule to figure out what to do. That's what Jesus is giving his disciples when he tells them they are to "be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves." Our challenge this morning is to adapt this principle Jesus gave his disciples for their journey to our own journeys through our lives.

So "be wise as serpents". Be clear headed and realistic. Follow the example of Mullah Nasrudin who was totally pragmatic about human motives. Follow the example of Jesus who was totally aware of the power of the religious and political establishment that he confronted.

We are called to be wise in the same way. As we seek to do the work of Jesus, to do justice and love our neighbor, we must be wise in our work. We need to be

clear headed and honest about the causes of injustice and the reasons that our neighbor is hurting. This is the only way that we will be able to change anything.

This is true whether we are talking about our world or ourselves. If we want to change ourselves, to be the best version of ourselves that we can be - more loving and generous, simply better human being - then we need to be honest and searching as we look at our own motives and rationalizations. We are told in Proverbs that wisdom is more precious than rubies, and we need all the wisdom we can get our hands on as we work to make the world a better place or ourselves better people.

Yet we are also called by Jesus to be “innocent as doves.” Yes, be clear-headed and realistic, but also be open-hearted and hopeful. Nobody said change was easy, but it is possible. We’ve seen it happen before. So don’t give up, and if you fail here, then pack up your bags and go on to the next place.

I believe that this is part of what Jesus is telling his disciples. It’s good advice for them and also for us. But there’s more than that at stake in this scripture. Remember, it’s Jesus who is sending the disciples on their journey. They are being sent out to do God’s work, and they are not being sent out alone. Through the mystery of the Spirit, Jesus is traveling with them.

This is the full meaning of the injunction to be “innocent as doves.” We can trust and hope – beyond what we can see and realistically assess – that somehow Jesus is traveling with us. Some years ago, I came across a simple prayer, “Please God, take my best efforts and make them turn out right.” It’s my mantra. We make our best effort, seek to practice the wisdom of the serpent, and then, as innocent as doves, we turn it over to God in the good hope that God will make it turn out right.

In a few minutes we will practice Holy Communion. Realistically, it’s just bread and grape juice. I’ll say some words. I’m a little rusty, so I’ll probably forget to say something. I just hope I don’t drop anything. Whatever, we’ll do the whole thing over again next month. That’s the truth, and a person aspiring to the wisdom of the serpent has to own what is true

And yet, the bread and the grape juice symbolize the body and blood of Christ. We are reenacting the holy mystery of the Last Supper here in this place. Our communion table is Christ's table. Through the bread and the cup, Christ comes to us, offering us strength and hope for the journey of our lives. We are invited into awe and wonder. So let us also be innocent as doves. Amen.