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Read: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7: 24-30

“Wisdom From Friends in Low Places”

In 1990, newly emerging country artist, Garth Brooks, had a song that took only eight weeks to rise to #1 on the country music charts and remained there for four weeks. It was one of the biggest hits of the year, consolidated Brooks' dominance of the market and became his signature song. The lyrics go like this:

“Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots,
And ruined your black tie affair.
The last one to know, The last one to show,
I was the last one you thought you'd see there.
And I saw a surprise, And the fear in his eyes,
When I took his glass of champagne,
I toasted you, Said honey we may be through,
But you'll never hear me complain,

(Chorus)

'Cause I got friends in low places,
Where the Whiskey drowns, And the Beer chases my blues away,
But I'll be okay,
Now I'm not big on social graces, Think I'll slip on down to the oasis,
Oh I got friends, In low places.

Now, I am not sharing these words to encourage drinking alcohol as a way to deal with life. Just the opposite, wisdom calls us into health and wholeness. The focus of my messages over the last few weeks, today and over the next several Sundays is Wisdom - spiritual wisdom, God's wisdom, wisdom from passion and soul force.

I don't want to give the impression either that wisdom is found in pubs and bars. Well it may be sometimes, though often it can leave you wondering. Words found written anonymously in one men's room read simply: “Things are a lot more like they used to be than they are now.” I'm still trying to wrap the logical part of my brain around that one - and yet in some strange way there

seems to be truth there. “Things are a lot more like they used to be than they are now.”

If wisdom from low places doesn't work then let's try one of the highest places. From the man who was, until recently, the leader of the most powerful nation on the earth. **He too shall remain anonymous: “I think - tide turning - see, as I remember - I was raised in the desert, but tides kind of – it's easy to see a tide turn - did I say those words?”** (Washington, D. C., June 14, 2006.)

Perhaps it is time to turn to a more reliable source of wisdom. Proverbs 22: 2 reads: “The rich and the poor have this in common: [God] is the maker of them all.” Then, a few verses later (22:8-9), “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed [in sharing], *for* they share their bread with the poor.” Note that the blessing/reward comes to the generous when they share.

In God's eyes people are people. In high or low places all are the same and those who foster inequality are meddling with the fundamental laws and forces of the created universe.

Don't you wish our governments would learn that? Why cater to the mega-wealthy and mega-powerful when it only brings calamity? A recent issue of Maclean's magazine (Aug. 31, 09) showed an enlightening graph. In the US in 2007, 10% of the people earned 49.7% of the income, almost 50%, of the total wages. Half the income in the US earned by 10% of the earners. The graph showed that ten years ago that same 10% earned only 40% of the income. So over 10 years their share of the pie grew from 40 to 50%.

That level is the highest it has been since 1927 - just before the great depression. It was 30% of the total income after WW2 and the '50s and has been climbing ever since. The much-ignored writer of Proverbs warns: “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity.” When will we attend to this ancient wisdom?

In the Gospel story today Jesus is caught denying health care to a foreign woman's daughter. Both the woman and her daughter were people of very low place in the system of the day. They would be despised and distanced by the high priests of health care of the day who taught that healing only came by means of appropriate sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem.

“. . . a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to

her: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But she answered him: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her: "For saying that, you may go -- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:25-30)

In our Legislative Assembly, in the governing party, we have some Christians. I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of their faith. And yet when they read that passage they don't seem to hear Jesus learning from this low caste woman that God's health care is not just for the in-group, the people of Israel in this case, but for the whole world. God's health plan is universal.

Instead, the message our government gets from the story is different. The message that they hear is that the poor, the marginalized, the out-group, the non-elite are only entitled to *crummy* health care! The Conservatives now tell us that health care reform cannot be stopped and so I am sure that, unless people speak up, very soon the wealthy individuals and corporations will be getting all the advantages and the poor will be blessed with all those crumbs.

Martin Luther, leading light of the Protestant Reformation, referred to the Letter of James as being made of straw. Straw may not be nourishing but it is chewy! So let me leave you with some straw from James to chew on this week:

"My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit: "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say: "Better sit here in the back row," haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? [God] chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? . . ."

Talk and act like a person expecting to be judged by the Rule that sets us free. For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly. Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time. James 2: 1 - 13 (The Message, selected verses)

We have a friend in the highest place who teaches us that wisdom comes when we have true friends in low places, loving them as Christ loves us.

Amen