

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
September 13, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Who Do You Say Jesus is?
Proverbs 1:20–33, James 3:1–12, Mark 8:27–38

“Imagine a scene in a farmhouse kitchen. It is early September. Crops are still in the fields, and the smell of freshly cut hay mixes with the odors of manure and the pungent staleness of last year's silage. Flies buzz everywhere, leaving their small black dots of contamination. The air hangs heavy with choking humidity, begging for a late afternoon shower to wash the atmosphere clean.”

“A ticking wall clock rivets the silence of three who sit around a kitchen table with its plastic red and white covering. Cups of tea, hardly touched, idle in front of each person, an older husband and wife, and their strapping teenaged son, nearly a grown man in his own right. Suddenly the young fellow stands and says, ‘Well...’ Mom and Dad jump up quickly, and walk him to the door. Outside is a battered compact car crammed with the stuff a first-year student thinks he needs to take to college.”

“There are too many important things to say, so nobody uses words. Mom grabs her son around the waist and clenches the air out of his lungs in surprising ferocity as she weeps into his chest. When he finally pats her away and turns toward Dad, there is a glistening of almost-tears in the older fellow's eyes that the son hasn't seen before. They shake hands, man to man, in a grip no bear could pull out of. Finally Dad manages a few expressions. ‘Son,’ he says, ‘Remember what we've taught you! When you get to the big city, and you find your place at the university, there will be all sorts of women who come after you. Pick wisely, or it will be the ruin of you. Remember who you are!’”

“And with that, the son escapes to find his fame and fortune. What will he be like in a year or four? What will he do with his opportunities? How will he face the challenges that cultured life has to offer him, once the protective structures of rural society no longer define how he is to live? Most importantly, who will he date, and why, and will he find a mate he can thrive with, or will he get caught in the lure of enticements that steal his soul as well as his heart?” Will the young man choose wisdom or folly as he goes off on his own for the first time in his life? Biblical Professor Wayne Brouwer, “Emphasis,” Sept./Oct.2009

Biblical Professor Wayne Brouwer wrote this scenario as an introduction to the passage read today from Proverbs. With a few minor changes it could be our story of when we first went off to college or it could be what happened in a number of our own homes this past month as we sent our child into the world of so many choices. It is at least a 3,000 year-old story. When Proverbs was written, it was designed as a lecture given to young Jewish men as they prepared to go off on their own into the world of 900 B.C. The teacher in Proverbs was a female figure known as Wisdom, whose job it was to warn the newly independent young adults against following the foolishness of the world; and to encourage them to stay with the wise ways of God. It is a lecture of practical wisdom that people of all gender and ages still need to hear today.

As a Christian pastor, and grandparent, I have been inspired to take the concept of this lecture on wisdom mentioned in Proverbs, the Epistle and Gospel lessons, and the father's advice of "Remember who you are," and expand them into a sermon to my granddaughter, Samantha. Samantha will soon enter Ohio State University as a freshman. It is also for any other young adult who may be here today. Everyone is invited to listen and think about what you would add to tell your child or grandchild.

Samantha, as you enter the University world, "remember who you are." We love who you are. Remember also who you have said Jesus is, your Lord and Savior. It was in his name that you were baptized. He is the one we taught you about in Sunday school, and led you to worship in church services. He saved you by his grace. He is the one we follow here at our house. He will always be present to help lead you.

There is a world out there, my precious child that will cause you to wrestle with your faith in him and the values by which he wants us to live. This is not all bad. On one hand it is good to study other religions and become knowledgeable in your field of study, secondary education. It is wonderful to meet other people from around this world. You love diversity in people. This is a perfect time to be of an open mind and to continue to learn to think for yourself. At the same time, do more to explore your faith in Christ beyond what we have taught you so that you grow into a deeper relationship to him. Affirm often what Peter so boldly did—that Jesus is your Messiah. Take classes that help you learn even more than we have taught you about the Bible because the more you know about it, the better you can intelligently share what you believe as a Christian with others. Pray to Jesus, not just before you take an exam, but often and with thanksgiving. Know that like God, we will always love you. The doors to your home, our home and the church are always open to you when the wrestling gets too much and you need a break. We offer sanctuary in many ways.

On the other hand, beware that not every idea, religious concept or person you encounter is good for you. There will be people who will tell you that Jesus Christ was just a nice man or he was a fraud. They may try to convince you that the Bible is only a human document, not the inspired written word of God. There will be fellow students who will want to lead you into the world of drug, alcohol, or sexual experimentation, ways to cheat on exams or plagiarize papers. They will call you names for having a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. They may shun you and even a professor or two may grade you unfairly because you are a Christian. Before you give in or give up, stop and ask yourself, is this what Jesus wants me to do? Is this following him as Lord or is this making something or someone else the Lord of my life. Is this wise or foolish?

Remember that Jesus also went through this kind of challenge and ridicule, and worse at the hands of some of the educated leaders of his day. They asked him who he was and by what authority he taught, healed and lived. When they did not like his answers, they killed him. Even his closest friends, like Peter could be a problem for him. In one breath Peter confessed him to be God's Messiah or Savior to the world. And in the next tried to stop him in his ministry when Jesus said he was going to suffer, die and be raised from the dead. Jesus sure set him straight with "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus

warned us that being his disciple was going to be tough. Keeping our minds and hearts on serving God is not always easy. Yet, Jesus told us in no uncertain terms, we are to take up his cross as he did for us and be willing to suffer while we remain faithful in our service to him. Our salvation and the salvation of others who see our faith in action may depend upon our remaining true to Jesus Christ in all situations. Guess what my precious child, you will fail at times and give into what is not good for you or others. Remember that Christ's forgiveness is always available. We should not take this lightly, for Jesus died to ensure this pardon for us. Christ's ultimate goal in ministry was to reconcile us to God, so be reconciled with the Christ who understands the challenges and ridicule you may face, and wants redeem you again when you have sinned.

As you gain in your knowledge of this fantastic world God created for us, and the wonders of university education that will unfold before you, also remember the wise advice, James, the brother of Jesus had to share with the early Christians, especially teachers, of whom you will one day be. James wrote, "For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." This is true Samantha. Teachers and preachers are held to higher standards than many other professions may be. It is not always fair, but it is true. This is in part because we hold the still maturing minds and hearts of children and youth in the palm of our hands. Parents and God entrust these precious children to us for hours, days and years on end. Unless you teach in a Christian school, witnessing your faith in Christ and his love to the students will be restricted. Yet, how you treat the learners in front of you, the good ones and especially the difficult ones will witness the love, grace, kindness and salvation of Jesus Christ in ways you cannot imagine. You can pray for them—silently at any time. Our words and our actions can be the healthiest guide, and best education these children and youth may ever experience.

This is what James' advice was about. As teachers we must control what we do with our bodies because it teaches our pupils what to do with their bodies. It also makes sense that James compares our tongues to the trim tab or small rudder that guides great ships into port. Or, to the small match that can set huge forests afire. As a teacher, you will be saying a lot of words to the students. Your tongue will be very busy. When I student taught elementary education and now as a pastor, lots of words came and come from my mouth. I have learned that even the tiniest comment can make or break the spirit of another person. Just the right words from my tongue can be Christ speaking through me, or not. Have I made mistakes with my tongue, oh my yes! It is Christ's words of forgiveness from his tongue that give me courage to speak again. James' point was also that the tongue is an outward link to what is in our hearts, minds and spirits. It verbally reflects in speech how committed we are in our soul to loving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and our neighbors as ourselves.

When we do not use our tongues to glorify Christ and call people insulting names it hurts all of us. It can inflame a scary rage within me. Yet, my parents and teachers taught me a great truth that cools my anger, "Sticks and Stone may break my bones but names or words can never hurt me," unless I let them. When I student taught fourth grade in the coal mining community of California, PA., there was a real nice student

named Eric. He struggled in school, so my assignment was to give him special tutoring. I discovered that when he would go home his father would constantly call him stupid and tell him that an education was a waste of time. All he needed to know was how to work in the mines. This name calling and degradation was breaking his spirit. I spent hours telling Eric what a great kid he was, that he was wise to learn all he could; that he was very capable of doing it and that even working in a mine required a good education. I wish I knew how Eric turned out and still pray for him.

A high school guidance counselor told me I would never make it in college and a Sunday school teacher told me I would never make it through seminary. These words from their tongues could have killed my spirit and career. But my parents, your great grandparents, told me over and over again that I was capable of doing whatever my heart desired. They also guided me to faith in Jesus Christ in the hope that what I did would also glorify him. They sacrificed to help me go to college and seminary. Because Grandma Holly and I have heard such positive words from the tongues of our parents, we have told you over and over that you are capable of doing whatever you want, that you are capable of great things.

Remember how your English teacher in your junior year invited you to the front and told the class to remember you now for someday you would do great things. Such wise words from a tongue to any of us can open us up to the wise use of the gifts God has given us, especially our tongues and their connections to our hearts, souls, minds and faith in Jesus Christ. I pray other students have been encouraged in the same way.

Samantha, as you go out into the world, "remember who you are." We love who you are. Also remember you have said Jesus is your Lord and Savior. He loves you even more than we do. You will be a great teacher! Love forever, Pah Pah, Bob.