

10.13.24 ~ Pentecost 21

“Persons of Peace”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Proverbs 22:1-12, 24-25 ^{NLT}

- ¹ Choose a good reputation over great riches;
being held in high esteem is better than silver or gold.
- ² The rich and poor have this in common:
The Lord made them both.
- ³ A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions.
The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.
- ⁴ True humility and fear of the Lord
lead to riches, honor, and long life.
- ⁵ Corrupt people walk a thorny, treacherous road;
whoever values life will avoid it.
- ⁶ Direct your children onto the right path,
and when they are older, they will not leave it.
- ⁷ Just as the rich rule the poor,
so the borrower is servant to the lender.
- ⁸ Those who plant injustice will harvest disaster,
and their reign of terror will come to an end.
- ⁹ Blessed are those who are generous,
because they feed the poor.
- ¹⁰ Throw out the mocker, and fighting goes, too.
Quarrels and insults will disappear.
- ¹¹ Whoever loves a pure heart and gracious speech
will have the king as a friend.
- ¹² The Lord preserves those with knowledge,
but he ruins the plans of the treacherous.
- ²⁴ Don't befriend angry people
or associate with hot-tempered people,
²⁵ or you will learn to be like them
and endanger your soul.

Leader: This Warning is from God's Wisdom.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 12:25-37 ^{NLT}

After a suspicious healing, the Pharisees disputed the miracle, saying Jesus' power was from Satan. They began to form a plot to kill him. Hear now, Jesus' response:

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and replied, “Any kingdom divided by civil war is doomed. A town or family splintered by feuding will fall apart. ²⁶ And if Satan is casting out Satan, he is divided and fighting against himself. His own kingdom will not survive. ²⁷ And if I am empowered by Satan, what about your own exorcists? They cast out demons, too, so they will condemn you for what you have said. ²⁸ But if I am casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has

arrived among you. ²⁹ For who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger—someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house.

³⁰ “Anyone who isn’t with me opposes me, and anyone who isn’t working with me is actually working against me.

³¹ “So, I tell you, every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven—except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. ³² Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come.

³³ “A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad. ³⁴ You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right? For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. ³⁵ A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. ³⁶ And I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. ³⁷ The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you.”

Leader: These are the words of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Peaceful and loving God, thank you for those qualities and direction in your wisdom literature and Scriptures. We know they are hard to emulate, so we ask you to make us people of peace in this warring and challenging world. Lord, we live in a region filled with violence, politics, greed, envy, and human conflict. You called us to yourself to be kingdom co-laborers, so we seek instruction to deal with all we face: disease, natural disasters, grief, loss, and war. We yearn to be a person of peace who can approach others gently yet with conviction. Speak to us through this message as we focus and listen for your guidance in the coming weeks. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Only 22 days until the Presidential Election! I encourage you to vote, period. If mobility is an issue, there is early voting, voting by mail, and drive-up service at your assigned polling place. You have time to review your decisions, do your research, pray about your decision, and then vote. Every vote is necessary in our democracy. OK, end of “commercial.”

I think it’s interesting to recall that last Sunday’s message included Noah’s story of the flood, and the dove’s found olive branch. It became a symbol of peace in the world. The “olive branch” term refers to a

negotiation or peace offering: “The song is one of several symbols that represent peace at the Games — white doves and *olive branches* among them. — *NBC News*, 27 July 2024.” We use that term in many diplomacy contexts, so let’s expand on it this week.

When we hear about the book of Proverbs in the Bible, we sometimes remember one or two particular sayings that we have heard from our parents or a Sunday School teacher growing up. These Scriptures have been treated almost like fortune cookie predictions; however, for you students of the Bible, you know that Proverbs is one of the Wisdom Books: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, a few of the Psalms, and Wisdom and Sirach from the Apocrypha. Essentially, they are lessons about how the world works if humans are to get along well together. Our passage today reminds us that if we have a good name, humility, prudence, and morality, all will be well. And if we bring up a child to understand right from wrong, they will not permanently deviate from a good path.

These words of wisdom also address deeper philosophical issues of human flourishing: justice versus injustice, the dignity of all people—rich or poor, honesty over sarcasm, care for your fellow humans over abuse or degradation, and humility over narcissism. The goals are the first words in my list, and the second words over which good prevails actually bring conflict and quarreling. God overthrows the words of the faithless by purifying the hearts, minds, and speech of his loyal believers. Edifying speech not only builds up people, but it also earns the respect of leaders, either kings and queens or presidents and diplomats. Having good character is better than silver or gold. It assures a type of peace and

freedom that only ethical choices and strong integrity can guarantee. The proverbs here remind us to live and work simply with honor and a spirit of humility and peace.

The one proverb we most remember in this chapter is the one about children. We must be examples to the children of our next generation, even if they are not our own. Last week, I set up a children's area in one of the side rooms of our Food Giveaway waiting areas. We've done a few activities before out in the main room, but it was always hectic and distracting. We had a little bit of children's furniture, donated items, stuffed owl, many books, a cozy blanket, and a rolling cart I cleaned up from the old Special Education room. I brought out some paper, stickers, coloring supplies, and voilà! We have an activity room for children and parents! Having something creative to do calms the little ones as they wait and, for the older children, takes their minds off any embarrassment in their situation. All of a sudden, they are not at a food mission, but at church having some fun and cooperating with new friends! We create a joy filled peaceful hour for both the parents and the child. Even if they never set foot in the Sanctuary, they experience God in a new and positive way. One day, they may recall this crazy church lady (who they eventually find out is the Minister!) who treated them with respect, dignity, and agape love. "Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old, he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6 ^{NKJV}).” Becoming a person of peace, not violence, depends on how a human experiences the kingdom of God and that includes how they meet, receive, and experience the **people** of God – you and me!

So, are you a person of peace? Or judgment, conflict, or debate?

The last three verses are particularly helpful for this time of year:

¹² The Lord preserves those with knowledge,
but he ruins the plans of the treacherous.

²⁴ Don't befriend angry people
or associate with hot-tempered people,

²⁵ or you will learn to be like them
and endanger your soul.

We all make mistakes in life, but a lifetime lack of character or integrity breeds contempt, greed, or dishonesty. The writer warns us to choose friends who are persons of peace and joy, not just for the world's flourishing, but for our own protection. Have you ever had a situation erupt in an unexpected dispute or quarrel, perhaps with a stranger, and you just feel like you want to run away? That is self-preservation, a God-given gift of intuition. I am not saying we are to fear disagreement; healthy conflict if done with compassion and respect can be fruitful and build unity. But conflict based on injustice, violence, verbal or physical abuse, or disrespect is never Godly.

I realize I'm "preaching to the choir," so to speak. So, let's look at the Gospel of Matthew. This was a troubling passage with several complex articles about Beelzebub and Satan versus Jesus and God. The religious authorities believed that the miracles Jesus performed must have been in collaboration with the Devil. Their faith was too small to see God's divine healing. As believers, we must make only one choice, Jesus, and not be confused over who held God's power to heal. No house should be divided against itself. We've spoken about unity before and how important it is. Jesus taught the importance of unity even among his disciples. His disciples were not to quarrel about how close to sit next to

Jesus (Mark 10:35-45)! His betrayer, Judas, was also known to him, was cast out, and then killed himself from the guilt. His greedy decisions were brought on by evil, not good. Matthew writes about how the authorities' hostility to Jesus was growing as well, yet those who worked against the Devil's purposes **were** doing God's work.

No one, not even a disciple, could “work” for conflicting kingdoms of good and evil at the same time. Harmony was not only called for but demanded. That summarizes our world today, doesn't it? Yes, forgiveness is necessary but not without God's own divine initiative. Willful disobedience, like Judas' greedy choice, breeds conflict, war, envy, strife, selfishness, lies, and confusion. True goodness, if only birthed by humans through manipulation or sheer willpower without God's divine influence is still wrong. We must set the example of good—ethics and intentional goals of integrity are a good start but can still be corrupted by power and lust. We must first surrender to God's will so that humility wins. **God** nurtures and develops a person of peace. As evangelists, we are to seek out persons of peace, that is, people whose hearts are ready to hear the Gospel of forgiveness. As Christians, we must cultivate our own spiritual lives to be those persons of peace, one who God has prepared for ministry, faith, and love. And then we must share that peace with others.

In God's mercy and grace, he sent us a savior, his son, Jesus. **He** is our hope! Remember how the dove appeared at Jesus' baptism, the dove, our symbol of peace and hope? And the olive branch after the destructive flood? Jesus is our peace; as persons of peace, may we share Jesus.

Amen. ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for this instruction to re-align ourselves with you and your direction through Scripture. Encourage our warring humanity to trust you and your calling in our lives and ministries. Empower us to be evangelists through the gifting you provided. Guide our thoughts and actions to draw others and ourselves closer to you as we serve in community together. May we find renewal, steadfastness, and beauty in our serving together. Jesus, it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**