

Sermon: The Joy of Self-Government

Focus: Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control.—Proverbs 25:28

Moderation is requisite for thoughtfulness, friendship, enduring love, tranquility, order in our lives (insofar as we can get it), and self-possession (to the extent we can achieve it).—Harry Clor, *On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World*.

“Give me that man that is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him in my heart’s core.”—Hamlet to his friend, Horatio, Act 3, Scene 2, lines 69-71.

First Scripture Lesson: Proverbs 25: 14, 27-28; 26: 9, 17

Thank you Kay, Katie, and David. I want to say more about nominations for elder and deacon, as well as our Presbyterian form of church government later, but for now, as we prepare for the reading and hearing of God’s Word, will you join me in prayer? Let us pray . . .

Our first Scripture Lesson is from the Old Testament, the Book of Proverbs—and here I have to say that proverbs in general, including those in the Book of Proverbs, can sometimes . . . be well, yes . . . annoying.

OK, maybe it isn’t the proverb per se that’s annoying but the person who’s saying it, when and where . . . and to whom, especially when the “to whom” is *me*. I mean: there I am at the counter at Old Scratch Pizza debating whether to add a large Angry Beekeeper (which does feature house-made hot honey) to what I’ve ordered already, the large Deluxe *and* the large Mr. Scratch, *both* loaded with toppings (Mmmm!). And the person next to me says, “Moderation in all things.” Now, I mean: that’s annoying.

So proverbs can be annoying, and sometimes even hurtful. Some proverbs have been **so** misunderstood, misused and misapplied . . . for example Proverbs 13:24—“Spare the rod and spoil the child”—it’s provided cover for so much abuse, that whatever its original wisdom. . . well, I think it ought to be permanently retired.

Proverbs 26:9 says it well: “Any fool can quote a proverb.”

And one of the most foolish ways to quote a proverb is to insert it—and yourself—into a dispute between two opposing parties. Proverbs 26:17: “Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears is one who meddles in a quarrel.”

To get that one, you have to remember we’re talking here about stray dogs—street dogs; they can be fierce and dangerous; you just don’t know. So if I pick one up by the ears, I’ve got a problem on my hands: if I let go *here*; he’ll come at me from left; if I let go *here*, he’ll come at me from the right; and if I let go of both at the same time, he’ll come straight for me. Same thing if you meddle in the quarrel of opposing parties, let go of one side, you get it from there; of the other, from there; let go of both, you get it from *both* sides, straight at *you*! So don’t meddle in the quarrels of opposing parties!

So: proverbs are wise sayings that themselves require wisdom to understand, use and apply *rightly*. But when that does happen . . . when a proverb really does bring wisdom to bear on a situation . . . it’s revelatory, memorable—it becomes a word fitly spoken. Proverbs 25:14: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”

So that's what I'm praying for today, a word fitly spoken.

For the Proverb I'm about to read, you have to remember that in the Biblical world, as in most of human history, warfare was conducted by siege: an attacking army would surround and besiege a city. Therefore strong, fortified walls were essential to a city's defense, to its very existence. In the Bible, one of the things that made the Babylonian defeat of Jerusalem so devastating was that they burned down the city walls; one of the things that made Nehemiah such a hero years later is that he rebuilds them.

Keep that in mind as you hear this proverb the subject is moderation/self-control/self-command/self-government. Proverbs 25:27-28, listen now for God's Word to us:

*It is not good to eat much honey, or to seek honor on top of honor.
Like a city breached, without walls, is the person who lacks self-control.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Second Scripture Lesson: Acts Chapter 24

He's one of those figures—and there are only a few of them—who show up in *both* the ancient Roman historians and the New Testament. His name is Antonius Felix, he's the Imperial Governor sent from Rome (hence his appearance in the Roman historians) to rule over the province of Judea, in which capacity he heard the case against the Apostle Paul in the year 57 CE (hence his appearance in the New Testament).

And both the historians and the NT agree: Felix was a bad act. The Roman historian Tacitus says that he “indulged in every kind of lust and cruelty, exercising the power of a king with a servile disposition.” Felix loves it when people bow down to him, flatter him, kiss his ring—that's his exercising the power of a king. But if you flatter him enough and in the right ways, you can get him to do whatever you want—that's his servile disposition. You can see this in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, too.

The group trying to throw Paul in jail hires a professional lawyer and rhetorician, one Tertullus, to make their case—the case against Paul—before Felix. But Tertullus makes his case not by saying what Paul has done wrong but by flattering Felix. Acts Chapter 24: verses 3-6, Tertullus the rhetorician speaking to the Imperial Governor Felix:

*“Your **Excellency**, because of you we have long enjoyed **peace**, and reforms have been made for this people because of **your** foresight. We **welcome** this in every way and everywhere with **utmost** gratitude. But, to detain you no further, I **beg** you to hear us briefly with your **customary graciousness**. We have, in fact, found this man [pointing at Paul] a pestilent fellow, an agitator and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. By examining him yourself, you, with your customary discernment, will be able to learn from him everything we accuse him of.”*

And by the way, throughout this whole spiel, how much rolling of eyes, surreptitious exchanging of glances, covering of faces, and smothered snorts of incredulity there must have been in that room! The historian Tacitus tells us that Judea was never so badly governed and so corrupt, never so full of division, violence, and unrest as it was under Felix.

When it's his turn to speak, Paul maintains his innocence. He's done nothing wrong, has caused no disturbance. And then he adds, Acts 24: 14-16:

I do follow the Way of Jesus, . . . I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. I have a hope in God—a hope that my accusers themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people.

And speaking of conscience, Felix, for his part, decides not to decide: he places Paul under house arrest, saying he wants to hear from him again, which he does on several occasions over the next two years. Did something Paul say disturb Felix's conscience?

Listen for what that might be—for what frightens Felix—as I read the closing verses of Acts Chapter 24. But also listen for what Felix *does*: a lifetime of self-indulgence is not an easy habit to break. Acts Chapter 24, verses 24-26, listen now for God's Word to us:

*Some days later Felix sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. And as Paul discussed justice, **self-control**, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you." At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Will you pray with me? Gracious Lord, may my words today be fitly spoken and fitly heard to your glory and truth. Amen.

When we think of moderation and self-control, we tend to think first on an individual level, about our appetites, especially our physical appetites, especially for food—example, my predilection for pizza. We all recognize that such moderation/self-control is a good thing (I *guess*) which is why we parents try to instill it in our children, even if we don't always model it. It's just that. . . well, it's just that it's so *hard*. "God give me self-control," cried St. Augustine, but then he added, "but not yet."

So yes, moderation/self-control of our physical appetites *can* be hard—a lifelong struggle for many of us. But it is also both necessary *and* useful.

Necessary because . . . well, because, without it, a person is at the mercy of every passing desire and pizza commercial. Like a city whose walls have been breached—defenseless before whatever comes along (such as, pizza topped with hot honey).

And *useful* because self-control enables us to do better things, to live meaningful lives. If we are slaves to our appetites, whichever one or ones they may be, we will do little more than spend our lives trying to satisfy them, with only temporary success—at best. And that's not much of a life, certainly not much of a human life.

But moderation/self-control relates to more than just physical appetites, and that's where things get more complicated . . . and more interesting. Do we—should we—be moderate and self-controlled in our commitment to what is right and good? "Yes, I believe in justice and kindness but let's not overdo it, you know, let's not get carried away, let's not take it too far—moderation in all things, you know."

What *that* usually means is “I believe in justice and kindness as long as it doesn’t inconvenience me or put me out.” I’m sure that the priest and the Levite who passed by the man in the the ditch told themselves that they were being moderate and sensible; but their “moderation” was nothing more than a cover for selfishness and cowardice. It’s the Good Samaritan who is “excessive”: energetic and passionate in his justice and kindness, and Jesus holds him up as a model because of it.

But to do that—to love the Lord our God with our whole heart soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves—to do that, to live our lives with our energies and passions *rightly* and *fully* focused towards what is *truly* good—that requires moderation/self-control in a different sense, a sense that gets closer to “self-command” or “self-government,” a sense that comes clearer if we look at the collective level.

The people of Judea had a problem, a serious problem, one that has beset human beings since time immemorial: the person governing them himself lacks the capacity for self-government. A recipe for disaster. In fact, it’s autocratic rulers like Felix who have made the best argument for democracy: power in the hand of a single corrupt person is such an awful thing, better to give it to the people.

When I was in 9th-grade confirmation class, Reverend Myers told us, in no uncertain terms, that the Presbyterian form of government was not only the inspiration for the American form of government, but the blueprint: the founders of this country, he told us, simply copied what God had already revealed to John Calvin and us Presbyterians.

Six years later, when I proposed that thesis in my Early American History seminar, Dr. Walker, in her gentle way, said, “*Well . . .*, it’s a *little* more complicated than that.” And she was right; but God bless Reverend Myers, he was a good pastor and a good teacher, and mind you, there’s nothing wrong with a little Presbyterian pride: if I boast, let me boast in the Lord.

But this much can be said: the Presbyterian form of government and the American form of government grow out of the same soil, and so they have significant similarities.

“We the people” . . . We the people of this congregation, nominate and elect our officers—specifically ruling elders (like, Katie and Kay) and deacons (like, David). We nominate them now, as Kay said (and please do look through the material in your bulletin later today and make your nominations to the Nominating Committee). And then, at our annual congregational meeting in February, we elect them.

So let me tell you something about being a church officer . . . yes, it’s rewarding, both spiritually and personally, as Kay and Katie and David all said. And it’s also fun, or maybe a better way to put it, there’s a deep joy to it.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, elders and deacons each come together as a body and seek to develop shared a vision of what is good and right to do—for us as a church to do—and then we do it. And in that process—that process of self-government—there’s joy, deep joy.

It’s like being part of a team, or a choir [turn]; or working on a big project together, or being part of any shared, cooperative endeavor: the joy lies in being part of something that is both good *and* greater than ourselves. And that requires moderation/self-control/self-command/self-government, both individually and collectively.

In any cooperative endeavor, if it’s going work—in order to form a more perfect union—we have to try to get along with one another, and so have to respect each other; we have to

recognize that we're all in this together, that each of us has a part to play (or sing or ring). And so have to listen: to one another (even when we disagree), and listen to the truth, listen even when we want to speak. And when we do speak, we need to speak the truth in love even to those whom we think badly, even dangerously, mistaken. In other words, we have to moderate and control, and maybe even subordinate, our individual opinions and our individual wishes and desires for the sake of the greater good, for the common good.

And all of that requires self-control. Katie, as you said, it's about understanding, representing and serving the collective whole of our church community—how all the many intricate parts of our church work together, for the good of our whole church community and beyond.

But when we do that, when it works, it's joyful. Because that's when we're loving the Lord our God with our whole heart soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves—that's when our energies and passions are rightly and fully focused towards what is truly good. And that's joyful.

And it's not just as a church officer. I hope you know—I hope you have experienced—that joy in all parts of this church—serving on committees (committee nominations are in the spring, by the way) being part of a Faith in Action Day, or the Wise or ID Ministries, or Church Partners, or Sunday school, or any of our choirs [gesture to bells], or ushers and greeters, or the Emergency Response Team, or the kitchen helpers (I could go on), and also especially by prayer and in worship, including and especially by prayer and worship on line, because although we cannot always be together in person, we are very much together as one body in the Holy Spirit. We have that joy together.

So I put it down as a general rule: if we're going to get anything worthwhile done, moderation/self-control/self-command/self-government, both individually and collectively are not only necessary and useful, but joyful. But I also have to add, "hard,"—hard, even though God made us for that joy, and wants nothing more than anything for us to have it.

Hard because there is a disconnect, a division in our selves—a gap and a loss, within our individual selves, among ourselves, between us and the world, between us and God—that makes us want to inflate our individual selves and our desires to the point where we act like they're the only thing that counts, the only thing that matters, the only thing that exists in the whole universe. Look at Felix.

Or look at Adam and Eve: "You can be like God," that's how Satan tempts them. In other words, you can be the first thing in the universe, the only thing that matters and you can always have your way and get what you want. And the first and most dire and most enduring consequence of their sin is separation—from themselves, from each other, from the world, and from God. And that disconnect, that division, that separation, that sin, plagues us to this day.

Plagues us to this day . . . And yes, in saying that, I am making reference to the politics and public life of our day. I, for one, think our politics and and public life could use a good dose of moderation/self-control/self-command/self-government, both individually and collectively. Yes, democracy gives power to the people, but *what* if the people themselves lack the capacity for self-government? Like a city breached, without walls, are those who lack self-control. We have met the enemy and the enemy us.

And yes, you're right about this too: by bringing up politics, by inserting myself and my proverbs into this quarrel between opposing parties, I've just picked up a passing dog by the ears. I'm either going to get it from the left, or the right, probably both.

Now: I'm not expecting anyone, anytime soon, to stand up on the floor of the Congress, and say, "What this august body needs today is a to be more Presbyterian. Not going to happen. I, too, have my Presbyterian pride—but I'm not delusional.

But I do have hope—hope that what we do here at Westminster makes a difference. And that's why our participation in our Presbyterian form of self-government, who we nominate and elect as elders and deacons, and even more than that our life together as a church, developing a shared vision with our energies and passions rightly and fully focused towards what is truly good—that's why it all matters; we can make a difference: a little yeast leavens the whole loaf; with faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains.

And that hope is based not on us, but on God. Because in Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, God comes to reconcile, to connect us and connect with us: to heal our divisions, to step into the breach, to enable us to share a vision of the truth, and to act on it for the common good—in our church, in our lives and in our world. God gave made us for that joy, and wants nothing more than anything for us to have it—as the Psalmist says, "In his right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Or as Paul put it, "I do follow the Way of Jesus . . . Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people."

So: God give me—give us—self-control . . . and now, please!

May this be our prayer today through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen