

DEVELOPING WISE GUISE

Sermon, January 29, 2017

Texts: Micah 6:1-8, I Corinthians 1:18-32

I like the story about the man who was having a problem with his computer printer; the printer type seemed to be growing fainter with each copy he printed out, so he called a local office supply store where a friendly clerk informed him the printer probably just needed to be cleaned. *"We'll clean it for you for our standard fee of \$75, but you might want to take a little time to read the printer's manual and try the job yourself."* Pleasantly surprised by his free advice and candor, the caller asked, *"Does your supervisor know that you discourage business?"* There was a bit of a silent pause, and then the employee replied a bit sheepishly, *"Actually, it's his idea. We usually make more money on repairs if we let people try to fix things themselves first."* We often make a mess of things when we try to fix things ourselves. That's true in life, too. I alluded to this last week; life can get very complicated, and if we are going to fix things, we need wisdom and direction ... more wisdom and direction than we innately have. We need the wisdom and direction of God.

I've pointed this out before, but the Bible is filled with real people, people like us, people who have a really hard time discerning, much less doing, the right things in life. Most of the time, like us, the biblical characters are not all bad or all good. They are a confusing mess of good intentions and bad ideas about how to pursue their good intentions and how to make things work and how to follow God's will in the midst of, as the last line of our preceding hymn puts it, "clouds and darkness." Like us, the people in the Bible are trying to figure out their roles and their lines and their character development in this unscripted drama we call life, and meanwhile their kids are growing up, their responsibilities are increasing, life's events are blindsiding them right and left and from every which way, things are starting to not work like they should, their health is starting to fail and their bodies change and things are starting to break out and down and up all over, and they just want to stop all the motion and commotion and cry out, *"What am I supposed to do NOW?"* Yes, the biblical characters are not all that different from you and me.

As Scottish theologian John Baillie once put it, *"The part of the road that most needs to be illuminated is the part where it forks."* Everyone comes to such forks in the road of Life. Unfortunately, that often seems to be the point of the road that is most dimly lit ... like already-rare Rhode Island street signs that are usually in the darkest shadows when you are driving around lost. There always seems to be little illumination at such forks. We know whichever "tine" of this fork you take will involve changes, changes that will have repercussions and lead to other forks in the road later on. Some of you may be at such a fork in the road today, and you want more illumination! Whatever the choice ahead of you may be, you may still have time to think about it, but sooner or later you must choose. You can't stand there at the fork forever. And it doesn't matter how old we are, we will always come to another fork in the road. And we know from experience each fork only leads to more forks. We know all too well the choices we are making today are the direct result of choices we made yesterday and the day before that and the day before that and the day before that, ad infinitum! We are aware of this and so we think long and hard every time we come to a fork in the road. We are often confused at the forks. In fact, at times we're more than confused; we are petrified ... we can't move, terrified of making a mistake. We don't want to make a foolish decision. We think if we make one wrong choice at one of these forks, we will miss out. And if the road we've chosen to travel becomes bumpy, we start to worry, *"I made the wrong choice back there, and now look where I'm heading! I have to get off this road. Soon!"*

This is usually the time some people make an appointment with the pastor or a counselor. They want illumination. What people most often want to know is, *"What is the right choice? What choice should I make? What choice does God want me to make?"* This is usually when I say, as profoundly as I can, *"I don't know."* This is also about when people begin to realize why pastoral counseling is free. But the point I try to make is this: I believe God is primarily **concerned with who we are, rather than with what we do.** That's pretty much the point of my sermon, so I'll say it again ... God is primarily concerned with who we are (*or, who we are becoming*), rather than with what we do.

Yes, He is concerned with what we do with our lives, and He really does want the best for us, but He has made us free creatures. He is *primarily* concerned with who I am, with what kind of person I am. He wants me to be faithful, He wants me to be obedient, He wants me to be a person of integrity, He wants me to be honest and honorable and upright and just and loving ... and *then* to make all my decisions accordingly. For my decisions are just that ... for all intents and purposes, they are MY choices.

The sermon title, "Developing Wise Guise," is not the mission statement of our youth group program ... as if we were trying to nurture a generation of smart alecks. No, the title comes from an archaic definition of "guise" that means *"manner, custom; way of speaking, behaving, and/or living."* It's about your character; it's about who you are. It's the root of the word DIS-guise, by the way ... a DISguise is something you put on to mask or cover or conceal your real "guise," who you really are. Your guise, your manner, your way of speaking, behaving and living has to do with *who you are*. And who you are, who you've become, is the sum total of thousands, if not millions, of decisions you have made along the way. C.S. Lewis, in Mere Christianity, writes:

And that leads on to my second point. People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that **every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before.** And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.¹

In short, our "guise," who we are, is largely determined by the choices and decisions we make. I believe God has given us the capacity to choose; and He graciously and freely leaves the choices to us as free beings. As the old saying goes, not even God can steer a parked car; we have to get moving at those forks, moving ahead with all the wisdom, grace and resolve we can muster. We may and should pray to God for wisdom and guidance, but ultimately we need to decide, and move on. Proverbs 3:6 -- "*In all your ways*" that means all the "ways" we go ... "*acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.*" There it is. That's how we develop the Wise Guise. The point of walking with God is to walk with God ... and then He will make our paths straight. Let me be quick to add that the redemption of grace and forgiveness at the core of the Scripture message is one that can redeem and save (*in the sense of "salvage"*) your being, your "guise", from a whole lot of bad decisions, but I'm getting a bit ahead of myself.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Micah is using the literary device of ushering the people of God into a courtroom, where, as the heading in our Bibles tells us, "*The Lord Presents His Case Against Israel.*" Imagine Micah ushering US as the people of God into this courtroom, where we are told to stand before the bar. The mountains and the hills and the "foundations of the earth" that have been around since the beginning of time and have seen everything are called to be the witnesses for the prosecution. The prosecutor is God. In verses three to five, the prosecutor God builds His case against "we the people." He approaches the bench and demands to know, "*My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you, except by maybe blessing you too much? Have you forgotten how I have carried you, how I brought you out of slavery, how I parted seas and rivers before you, how I gave you a home, a place among the nations, how I redeemed you from the old slaveries of your former way of life? Answer me!*"

In the way Micah has constructed this courtroom drama, he isn't concerned so much that "we the people" have broken God's laws as he's concerned we have broken God's *heart*. We've broken His fatherly heart by failing to remember and appreciate that ALL we have, even life itself, is a gracious gift from His hand. In the words of Karl Barth, "*All sin is rooted in a lack of gratitude.*" When we forget our indebtedness to God, we forget God. And when we forget God, that's when the really bad things start to happen. When we forget God, we wind up hurting ourselves, we wind up hurting others, and we tend to make many unwise and unsound choices and decisions with our lives.

As Micah continues his courtroom drama in verses six and seven, we the accused make our meager defense before the Prosecutor. We ask (V. 6) "*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow down before the exalted God?*" Perhaps this might be paraphrased, "*What do you want from me, God? What do I have to give You to take care of this? How much is this going to cost? Shall I come to You with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will that do it? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression? Will You be satisfied with that?*"

My take on this is that the prophet is intimating these are bad questions, corrupt questions, cynical questions. These are questions asked by people trying to bribe and bargain their way out of trouble. After these questions are asked, in verse 8 Micah sort of breaks into this drama he is writing, he cuts to the chase and starts speaking to the accused: "*He has showed you, O man, what is good!*" In other words, "*Oh, man! Stop asking such questions ... God's already told you what He wants! He has already told you what is good. If you are really honest with yourselves, you know. Don't keep asking God what you are supposed to do; He's told you already! Don't keep avoiding the issue, don't keep putting off your responsibilities, don't keep making excuses for things you've done or left undone with your favorite canard of being confused about what God wants you to do.*" In short, don't keep putting off doing what you know to be right and good by claiming you don't know what the will of God is for your life. I think if we are honest with ourselves in our heart of hearts we really know what it is God wants us to do ... we know what it is we must do to make things right, we know what it is we must do to live lives of integrity, honor and goodness, we know that He wants us to be truthful and honest and trustworthy ... yes, for the most part we really do know what it is we must do to please God. As the prophet sums it up, "*And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"

How do we develop a wise guise? "*In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.*" There it is. Get moving! The point of walking with God is to walk with God ... humbly, faithfully, honorably, consistently ... making our choices along the way, and watching and experiencing how He will make our paths straight. One final thought ... and this is really a sermon in itself ... but as Paul makes crystal clear, the epitome of God's wisdom is found in a Person. As Paul expressed is, in Jesus we find all the wisdom we need from God ... and in Him we find the grace and power of the redeeming God Who can restore our lives, our "guise," from the bad decisions we have made. To develop a "wise guise," we would do well to honor Him, follow Him, and acknowledge Him in all we do.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, MacMillan Publishing Co., NY, NY c. 1948, p. 86 – emphases added