

Sermon: August 16, 2009
Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
Berne, Indiana

Proverbs 9:1-6, 10
Psalm 34:9-14
John 6:51-58

THE BREAD AND WINE OF WISDOM
By Ryan Ahlgrim

The city of Juarez, Mexico is one of the most violent cities in the world. Last year over 1300 people were murdered in Juarez, the vast majority of them in drug wars. The chief of police tried to crack down on the drug lords. They retaliated by ambushing and murdering 100 police officers last year. The drug lords were so powerful in Juarez that last February they gave the chief of police an ultimatum: resign, or a police officer would be murdered every 48 hours. The chief of police knew that he could not prevent that from happening, so he resigned.

Juarez isn't the only city in Mexico dominated by drug lords. Why are these drug lords so powerful in Mexico? The answer is basically: money. They make a lot of money from illegal drugs. So who is buying all of these drugs? Americans. The United States is by far the biggest market for illegal drugs produced in Mexico.

The Taliban has been making a comeback in Afghanistan over the last few years. Eight years ago, when the U.S. invaded, it looked like the Taliban were swept away. But they've regrouped, become re-supplied with weaponry, and they've been taking over large parts of Afghanistan as well as Pakistan. Where is the Taliban getting its money to fight this war against the Americans? From the production of heroin. Who's buying the heroin? Europeans and Americans.

Nobody thinks drug lords and drug violence are good things. Nobody thinks it's wonderful that police officers are getting ambushed and murdered in Mexico. Nobody—or at least very few—think it's wonderful that the oppressive Taliban have re-equipped and are back in power and are killing ever-greater numbers of people. And yet that knowledge does not keep Americans from buying and using illegal drugs. Why is that? Because we put pleasure ahead of consequences.

The world is warming up. Global warming is now pretty much accepted by nearly everyone as an established fact. The latest measurements by climatologists predict that

by the end of the century sea levels around the world will go up at least 40 inches. Indiana will have a climate similar to the panhandle of Texas.

There are still a lot of people who doubt the disastrous predictions made by most climatologists, but as Brian McLaren points out, nobody is saying, "Let's pump even more CO₂ into the atmosphere and raise global temperatures even more!" Everybody agrees that it would be better if this were not happening. And yet, this has not decreased the number of electronic gadgets we're buying that need to be plugged in or re-charged. It hasn't slowed down sales of plasma TVs that soak up a lot more electricity than regular TVs. And we keep taking all kinds of unnecessary trips in our cars. And yet all of these things pump more CO₂ into the atmosphere. So why do we do it? Because we put pleasure ahead of consequences.

My family has a membership at the YMCA. A couple of times a week we drive over there to work out on the weight machines and jog on the treadmills. Sometimes when I get there the parking lot is full, so I drive up and down the aisles looking for the closest parking spot. When I do this my wife rolls her eyes. What is the point of looking for a closer parking spot when in a few moments we're going to be walking on a treadmill? It's crazy.

Think about it: why do we buy riding lawn mowers? Simple: because it's a lot easier cutting the grass that way than pushing a lawn mower. But when we use a riding lawn mower, we become more sedentary, and then we start putting on extra pounds; so then we join the YMCA so we can walk on a treadmill! It's crazy!

No one thinks it's good to be out of shape and put on too many pounds. Nobody thinks it's good to get diabetes and heart disease. And yet that doesn't stop us from buying all the labor saving devices we can so we don't have to exert ourselves—and then we pay money to exert ourselves! Why do we do this? Because we put pleasure over consequences.

I think I'm seeing a pattern here. In virtually every area of life our dominant behavior is to put pleasure ahead of consequences. We do this over and over and over again. And when the negative consequences come, we don't stop pursuing the pleasures that caused the consequences. Instead, we continue the pleasures while spending lots of money and energy trying to find a way to fix the consequences—which usually don't work all that well anyway.

Wouldn't it be wiser, wouldn't it be so much more sane, if we would curb behavior that has negative consequences, and avoid the consequences to begin with?

Yes, of course that would be wiser. But wisdom is a very hard thing to embrace. To embrace it we need a power and clarity and desire outside of ourselves. To embrace wisdom, I think we need God.

Proverbs 9:10 says: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” “The fear of the Lord”—what does that mean? It’s a strange phrase. It does *not* mean being afraid of God. You can toss that out. So what does it mean?

Look again at this verse: it’s in Hebrew parallelism. The second line interprets or expands on the first line, saying basically the same thing. So “the fear of the Lord” is parallel with “knowledge of the Holy One.” The fear of the lord means to know God or to know about God. So what do we need to know about God that will make us wise? That at the center of God is a moral order, a moral goodness. To fear God means to embrace the moral order that is in God, and when we do that we are beginning on the path of becoming wise.

Look at Psalm 34:11: “Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” And what is it the psalmist then teaches them? A couple verses later it says: Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” This is what it means to fear the Lord: To not lie, stay away from evil, do good, and seek peace. In other words: embrace the moral order that is in God.

God’s wisdom seeks to entice us. So wisdom builds a beautiful house and puts out a wonderful feast. Then wisdom sends out servant girls with an invitation: “Come, eat my bread and drink my wine!” We have experienced that God’s greatest feast has come to us through Jesus. Jesus is God’s wisdom embodied. In Jesus we see most clearly the moral order at the heart of God. And what is that morality? To trust, to share, to heal, to love, to do no harm. This is God’s wisdom.

But not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord” has embraced God’s wisdom. Not everyone who goes to church and sings hymns and listens to Christian music at home and says they love Jesus is actually embracing God’s wisdom.

Last April the Pew Research Center did a survey of Americans asking them whether torture can be justified against suspected terrorists. People could give five responses: never, rarely, sometimes, always, or I don’t know. What the survey showed is that, overall (this is not true for individuals), the more often a person goes to church, the more likely they are to justify torture. The survey broke down its results by different Christian groups, and the groups of Christians who justified torture the most often were white evangelicals. Those who were most opposed to torture were African-Americans.

Why would attending church more often—particularly white evangelical churches—make you more prone to justify torture? Why would a Christian justify torture more often than the average American? What in the Bible justifies torture? Nothing that I know of.

That leads me to believe that something outside the Christian faith is getting imported into a lot of churches. And I think I know what it is: fear. The more afraid we are, the more likely we are to justify drastic measures to protect ourselves. This is a shame, because fear is the antithesis of the Christian faith. At the heart of the Christian faith is to trust God in all circumstances, and to respond to those who are threatening us with compassion.

When the Bible says that at the basis of wisdom is embracing God's moral goodness, we might say, "Well, duh!" But actually this is a very important point. Because a lot of people think that wisdom means going beyond goodness. To truly be wise we may have to cheat a little, or play hard ball, or bend the rules, or torture suspected terrorists. But scripture says, "No! The beginning of wisdom is embracing the moral order at the center of God."

We need an infusion of God's wisdom in our churches. A lot of churches need to be a lot more saturated with Jesus. Jesus is God's bread and wine of wisdom. Let us feed on Jesus and be made strong. Let us drink up Jesus and be inspired. Let us feast on Jesus, casting out fear and selfish pleasure, so we pursue God's peace.