



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION/GRADUATION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 20, 2012

Diane Turner-Sharazz, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Director, Course of Study School of Ohio, Methodist Theological School, Delaware, OH, and
Pastor, Covenant United Methodist Church, Springfield, OH

Lection – Psalm 1 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; (v. 2) but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. (v. 3) They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. (v. 4) The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (v. 5) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; (v. 6) for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Graduation Sunday is that day in which the church honors its graduates, marking the achievements of those who have reached an educational milestone. For some churches, this includes not only high school, college, and those receiving graduate degrees, but also children graduating from kindergarten, or from elementary moving to middle school, etc. The point is to recognize and celebrate the achievements, to emphasize the importance of education, and to encourage persons to continue in their journey of learning. Promotion Sunday in the church acknowledges completion of a Christian education class and the move to a higher level, generally based upon age-level.

More importantly, this Sunday places an emphasis upon Christian education in the life of the church and its importance for the making of disciples and developing of kingdom-building ministries. Those graduating are encouraged to continue in a lifelong journey of study of the word of God, to continue growing in the faith and building upon the biblical foundation which has already been laid.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 1

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I remember Graduation Day in the church of which I was a member. A special afternoon program was held to celebrate and highlight the graduates. But it also served as an opportunity for those graduating from high school to give a 5–10 minute talk based upon a Scripture or theological subject. In this way, the secular education achievement was acknowledged and honored, while at the same time being placed in the larger context of Christian faith and the life of the church.

During my formative years, I was a member of an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Oklahoma. Presently living in the Midwest, I recently returned to pastoring a local church after having taught homiletics in a seminary for thirteen years. In addition, I continue to work at the seminary as director of an educational program for local pastors. Education is an important value that was instilled in me as a child. The education of clergy, as well as educating and the equipping of the saints in the church, is essential for wholeness in the faith and the ministry of the church.

At the time of this writing, the national context is that of a country in slow economic recovery following a recession. Poverty has increased, unemployment is high, and people are uncertain in these still unstable times. Statistics show that the percentage of African Americans graduating from high school and receiving higher education degrees has increased, but African Americans continue to disproportionately fill our nation's prisons. The influence of the church to make a difference in communities and society often falls short. However, all trends of the last decade or more have clearly shown that those with only a high school education are dramatically more likely to be underemployed, unemployed, or worse. Now, more than ever, the Black church must renew and reinvigorate its commitment to secular and Christian education. Too much is at stake for us to do otherwise!

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalms 1 is presented as a beatitude—“*Happy or blessed* are those who....” This psalm sets up a contrast between the righteous and the wicked, offering two different ways of life from which to choose. The choice that one makes will lead to one being happy or one perishing. Life or death.

It should be noted that this psalm provides the opening for the entire five books of Psalms. The themes of this first psalm, choosing the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked, will be repeated throughout.

In verse 1, those who are happy are portrayed in terms of a negative characterization, that is, in light of what they do **not** do. In parallel lines, we read that they do not follow, they do not take the path of, and they do not sit in the seat of the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers. The NIV and KJ versions translate the verbs more dynamically: “Blessed is the man who does not *walk*..., or *stand*..., or *sit*...” Those who are happy/blessed do not follow the advice or counsel of the wicked. (There is nothing that a wicked person can tell someone that will lead to happiness.) The implication is that those who are happy listen to a different voice, are led by different understandings. The happy do not take the path, travel the same direction, or find themselves even standing on the same road as sinners. The implication is that sinners are going the wrong way, missing the mark, ambling down the road that will lead to their destruction.

Persons who desire to be happy do not, will not, sit in the seat of scoffers. Scoffers are understood to be persons who are arrogant in their resistance to instruction. The NIV uses the term “mockers.” Implied in this is an attitude of disdain and dismissal. The happy will not find their comfort in the company of persons who maintain such attitudes and character. This verse paints a picture of one’s posture or positioning in relationship to the wicked, sinners, and scoffers. Those who are happy do not draw near to, or are not drawn into, the ways of the wicked, sinners, and scoffers.

The transition to verse 2, “but,” indicates a contrast. Those who are happy are, rather, the ones who *delight* in the law of the Lord, who *meditate* upon his Law day and night. This verse is key in understanding the distinction. The Hebrew word here is *tora*, often referring to the Deuteronomic law. However, the word itself refers to *instruction*. This text is helpful for 21st-century readers who have access to Christian Scriptures as well. We can appropriately extrapolate the understandings of the present text into understanding the instruction of God throughout the entire Bible.

This is a complete attitude shift from what was seen above. Delight connotes sheer joy and pleasure in receiving instruction from God’s word. Beyond delight is the commitment to the instruction, by meditating upon it day and night. Meditating—reflecting upon, pondering, concentrating upon, thinking carefully about, mulling over, deliberating, turning over in one’s mind, ruminating.

Rather than resisting and shunning instruction, the one who is and wants to be happy is in a constant state of openness to God’s instruction, God’s revelation. The *tora* of the Lord is the

source of one's joy, bringing about that happy and blessed state. God's instruction is that which helps to shape and form the identity of the one who receives it.

Verse 3 provides a vivid illustration or simile depicting what the happy who delight in and meditate upon the law of the Lord are like. The psalmist reminds the reader of trees that are planted by streams of water, those streams providing nourishment and sustenance for the tree which develops strong roots, such that the tree becomes productive and fruitful in the appropriate time. Like the rooted and fruitful tree, the happy and blessed ones prosper in all that they do.

The wicked (verses 4-6) are contrasted with the happy ones. Rather than being like the strongly rooted tree, the wicked are like chaff. Chaff, that covering of grain that is removed during the winnowing process, is seen as fleeting, unstable, able to be blown away by the wind. The psalmist makes the point that the wicked will not *stand* in the judgment, nor will sinners be able to stand in the congregation of the righteous. Rather, their fate will be to perish. They will not be like the righteous, whose way is watched over by the Lord.

The happy ones are the righteous who are constantly connected to the source of life, God, relishing in God's care and instruction. The wicked are those who are self-centered rather than God-centered/connected. They refuse God's instruction and seek to follow their own way, resulting in their having no standing with God. They, like the chaff, will be driven away by the wind.

On this Christian Education/Graduation Sunday, people are invited into a lifelong commitment to the study of God's word. Not only will study and constant openness to God's instruction firm one's connection with God, it will bring knowledge and wisdom, as well as shape persons' identities as human beings, as people of faith, and as people of righteousness. Additionally, it will bring forth true happiness and blessings. Self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness will lead only to that which is fleeting, but God-centeredness will lead to life and life eternal.

Celebration

In the midst of a world that is wracked with poverty, injustice and inequalities, war and violence, God's word calls the people of God to move towards God's peace (*shalom*) and love. God's instruction is a word of LIFE, not death. LOVE, not hate. It gives foundational wisdom for living and being in relationship with the One who is the SOURCE OF LIFE. It is a word for NOW.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: v. 1: people with closed ears to the wicked, people refusing to sit with scoffers, sinners walking their own way, people going in the opposite direction, people mocking and holding their hands over their ears so they can't hear instruction; v. 2: people meditating; v. 3: trees with full, green leaves, planted by streams of water, abundance of fruit; v. 4: chaff blowing in the wind; v. 5: wicked and

sinners blown off their feet; v. 6: the Lord watching over the righteous—God’s protective covering, no protective covering for the wicked.

Sounds: v. 1: voices of people giving advice; v. 3: running water; v. 4: chaff fluttering or being wildly blown by the wind;

Smells: v. 3: fresh water, fresh fruit;

Tastes: v. 3: ripe fruit; and

Emotions: happiness; delight; joy; peace.