

## **“in a pretty how town”**

*Sermon by*

*January 23, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill*

**Sirach 38:24-34**

**Matthew 5:1-11**

*“The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; only the one who has little business can become wise (Sirach: 38:24).”*

Just what do you think is being inferred here? And if you claim to know, do you think that it's true? “The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; only the one who has little business can become wise.”

I think to understand, we must first discern the contextual importance of a scribe, as well as what Sirach means by “business” and having little of it. Thus, let us all grasp that a scribe in the time of the Old Testament was unlike any of our present-day constructions. For it wasn't some sort of subordinate position, a mere intermediary for a thinking-mind imbalanced by a lazy hand. No, a scribe was actually the IT job. You made it if you were a scribe. It was like getting your M.D. or your Ph.D. You got all the girls. Well, maybe then Ph.D. is a bad example, but it was definitely like getting your M.D. You had to go through rigorous training in various disciplines; you had to study multiple languages, be well versed in the Law, tax systems, and the interpretation of sacred holy texts. You were the right hand of government and religious officials and you were a teacher of things few could comprehend, read about, or write of. So no, you were not a mere copyist, no, not at all, for you were a Scribe, and deservedly proud and wise at that.

But how did one become a scribe? Could anyone do it? Well, according to Sirach, the main credential was being of little business -- not “small” business, mind you (it's not like Sirach was trying to say you had to be an owner of a Pharisaic Comic Book store or some other small venture). No, by being of little business you had to first come into an opportunity of leisure, such that your days were governed by minimal work and the luxury of choice. And this was a rare exception of life, for a scribe could not be molded from just anyone, anyone from any class. No, a scribe and its gained wisdom could only be aspired to from one coming by way of an expanse of free-time; that is time left unchallenged by the pressures of hunger, shelter and survival, and marked by the discretionary choice to do as one pleased. Indeed then, not just anyone could be a scribe; you had to first be birthed into a select happenstance unconscionable by the vast majority of those cloaked in the lineage of the ordinary.

Now, of course we know today this isn't as black and white, everywhere all the time. We all know of those who have come to wisdom and status by way of “a lot” of business, from a path as distant from discovering leisure as ants remain from grasping the expansion of the universe. But can we also be honest and admit that most of those cases are of special occasion? For isn't it more commonplace, that most of those, indeed most of us, who come to be Women and men of varying importance and specialized wisdoms, are also those who were originally given the opportunity of excess, such that we were blessed with the platforms of time and space to independently form realities emanating from the question, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”

And that's precisely the question and answer that Sirach was getting at. That yes,

scribes are indeed wise for they have taken advantage of their opportunity and subsequently excelled, but that does not change the reality that they fell into privilege at their onset, and thus an opulence of little business, while the majority of their other start from a much less fortuitous genesis.

Considering then such an applicable corollary, how can any of our adversaries say with any conviction that The Bible entirely fails at being relevant today? For in just one passage, Sirach has identified the categories that many of us, and indeed many of our neighbors southeast on the avenue have fallen into. And thus, through his words we are given a Word, a Word of wisdom and a Word of notice. That though many of us here today are the scribes, the Women and men of our pretty how towns, we nonetheless share our place with the anyone's and noone's of our race who exist yet amongst us nearby today.

Indeed then, we have been given a Word, a Word for our children (if not ourselves) that they should not forget as up they grow. That though they might in the future attain eminence in public assembly, be found amongst the rulers expounding judgment and discipline, there is yet amongst them a culture of faces who equitably assist in maintaining the fabric of their world. That though they might turn out wise, they ought still not pass by those devoid of their own opportunity of leisure, but rather acknowledge that they too ought be noticed, and allowed, and affirmed, and benefacted, and enrolled, and embraced, and by God, loved; for through his words we have all be given thee Word, a Word similar to these words requiring some consternation:

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did

Women and men(both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance  
(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon  
(and only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess

(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding) summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came  
sun moon stars rain

My brothers and sisters, Jesus too was an anyone. He was the son of a carpenter, a profession of great business with no hope toward wisdom. The artisan class, after all, was just one rank above a slave on the totem pole of societal approval. While Pharisees, Roman governors, and indeed, scribes were reaping the benefits of community authorization, Jesus was born to a lowly craftsmen in an even less significant region called Nazareth. Thus, to those Women and men who were in charge, Jesus and his band of disciples were the distant relatives of anyone and noone -- specks in a grand cesspool of Hellenistic expansion. Physical and monetary power, along with nobility and class were the benchmarks of success, and this so called-Christ possessed none of them. Little by little and was by was. He was thus to be ignored, mocked and even forgotten for he was in his beginning a mere nobody...

But oh how it all then came crashing down at the Sermon on the Mount! For in the greatest sermon ever to be preached, Jesus capsized their entire order. The poor became the blessed. The weak inherited the Earth. The suffering many became the chosen few. In an instant then, the mountains were shattered and the sky brought to the ground; down became up and outcast royalty, noone by everyone, someone if anyone.

[Do you know that there are atheist philosophers, at least two of whom I studied under, who argue for Jesus' historicity because of this singular moment? They say that the beatitudes were so radical a message that they had to have found their inception from a living source.]

My friends, are you of understanding? Your Lord and Savior was born into nothing and while living amongst noone emerged into the most recognizable someone this world has ever known! Thus, the charge from your Christ is to become changed Women and men and scribes, passing not by those found in places removed from opportunities toward wisdom, for that indeed would have meant passing by Jesus as well. Rather, you are to use the gifts you have through your leisure received, and cultivate, so to change the order of our world. And by God, you must advocate that your children do the same. They cannot forget as up they grow, for if they stumble by spells of entitlement the gospel is certainly lost if not entirely meaningless. No, they, like anyone of us, must have their eyes reawakened to their neighbor irrespective of status; together appreciating that each and everyone of us collectively comprise the fabric of our universal existence within this shared pretty how town.

Amen.