

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Dear Abby

The scriptures are full of wisdom and advice from the Jewish community. I was thinking of examples of modern-day advice givers, and Dear Abby, and Ask Ann Landers came to mind. Did you know that the two women behind these syndicated columns are twins and are also Jewish? According to the Jewish Women's Archive, "*Both columns were characterized by a straightforward tone, practical advice, and a firm but modern moral sensibility*" and that "*both women used humor, including sarcasm and one-liners, in their responses.*"* Today all of the scriptures seem to be giving us wisdom and advice, and I think we can all use a strong dose of both these days.

When I was attending Catholic school, one of my religion teachers was creative in her approach to Bible Study. She would use a method called "splitting Scripture" to determine what part of the Bible we would discuss. The idea is to take a Bible in your hand, and split or open it randomly. Wherever you land, that is where you start. My teacher said she felt like it gave the Holy Spirit an opportunity to select a reading. I am fond of this method of reading the Bible, and sometimes—more often than you might imagine—the message is on point to what is going on in my life. I recommend that all of you try this sometime. Splitting scripture is how I was first introduced to Sirach. Sirach is commonly called the Wisdom of Sirach. It is a work of ethical teachings, from approximately 200 years before Jesus, and it was written by the Jewish scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem. It is the largest wisdom book from antiquity to have survived.**

In order to explore the wisdom and advice in the scripture, I decided to merge these two concepts, Dear Abby letters and the book of wisdom. I will read to you from an advice column I call, "Dear Sirach."

Dear Sirach, It is tough to keep the commandments, and I want to be happy, so a few lies and some five finger discounts make life a little easier. Should I really choose to lead a blameless life?—Sincerely, Mischievous in Mesopotamia

Dear Mess, "*If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully, is a matter of your own choice.*" Choices have consequences my dear, and you need to think long-term, like eternity long. Earthly things are temporary, choose wisely.

Dear Sirach, I am trying to make a career choice. Do I work in the smoke houses, or take to the sea and become a fisherman?—Confused in Capernaum

Dear Confused, "*He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.*" Both have their advantages, just be careful not to get burned or to drowned!

Dear Sirach, Lately I have been depressed and I am not sure life is worth living.—Hamlet from Haifa

Dear Hamlet, "*Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given.*" Be, or don't be, but for me, I choose life. Choose to live into the wonder of God's creation. Embrace the beauty of all creation and live as a child of God, perfectly created to be unique and loved. The choice is yours. Do not choose to die to the business and chaos that would steal away our joy of life. Follow God's commandments, and peace, love, and kindness will be your companions on your journey.

Dear Sirach, My parents tell me that God knows everything, but I am just not sure. I read your column faithfully, what do you say about God?—Yours, Doubting Thomas

Dear Tom, "*For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every human action.*" God is all knowing, all seeing, and you cannot

hide what you do from God. Stay on the path that God illuminates for you and you will not know shame in this life. You should put your faith in God, and not me by the way.

Dear Sirach, My betrothed was really nasty to me, and I caught him stealing my father's work tools. He said God told him to do those things, should I believe him?—Clueless in Tiberias

Dear Clueless, *“He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.”* God gives us maximum support in all that we do in this life, but that does not include support for selfish and sinful actions. The amount of good we can do with God's support is limitless, but support ends at self-serving tasks.

The Epistle sounds more like a scolding than advice giving, but it points the reader in the right direction, lest they stray from the path Jesus wants us to take. Paul is pretty straight forward in his comments on what we should be doing, and referring to the readers of his day as children, and people of the flesh, because they just do not get the idea that Jesus broke the old patterns of following the strongest person in the pack. We are meant to be one people, through Baptism. The message to stop focusing on worldly issues and focus on the kingdom was difficult to understand. Living for the moment, and sometimes just surviving life, is a challenge. We want to have a Kingdom view, but cannot escape being creatures of habit.

The Gospel advises us as well, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... You shall not murder, commit adultery, bear false witness—all really good advice. But Jesus goes further, and tells us not to assume that taking someone's life is the only thing we need to avoid. We should also not stay angry or hold a grudge, and then assume that God will be pleased with what we offer. Reconciliation and forgiveness are required if we are to really do what God is asking us to do. We need to live not just according to the law, but according to the spirit of the law, and that means we need to love each other. *They will know we are Christians by our love.*

The next part of the Gospel speaks to what seems to be happening today. What used to be understood as good vs evil, black and white issues, have now become 50 shades of grey. All of these scriptures are trying to remind us to live our best lives—to trust God and do the right thing, to help each other, and know that when we focus on and work for God's kingdom we are surrounded by love and support. We may not be protected from the laws of nature, but we will be able to sleep at night, knowing that we are doing everything we can to make the world a kinder, and more tolerant place. We are human, and free advice is not always valued. We often dismiss free advice, but in this case, we need to listen to all the scripture holds for us today. Do not murder, cheat, or lie. Do not make other people into idols you follow – listen to your head and your heart and do the right thing. Do not hold grudges against people, forgive, and move forward, a better life awaits you. Keep the commandments, act faithfully, choose life, and wash yourself clean in the waters of Baptism. Renew your vows to resist evil and to uphold the dignity of all people. In a few minutes we will pour, and then through the waters of Baptism will we will welcome Nat and Flora, into our Holy Cross family as sisters and brothers of Christ. If I had to leave you with any advice, it would be this: Love God, love each other. Try and be the best version of yourself you can be. See Jesus in other people—it is our everyday encounters that shape our world, be kind and empathetic, and trust in the truth, the life, and the way.

In Baptism, we are seeking the holy, and we continue to seek what is holy on our faith journeys. Perhaps we need to stop and just be in the moment—because the holy is everywhere. I have one more thought to share with you. It is a poem titled *Small Kindness*, by a poet from new England named Danusha Lameris. She wrote, *“I've been thinking about the way, when you walk down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs to let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you” when someone sneezes, a leftover from the Bubonic plague. “Don't die,” we are saying. And sometimes, when you spill lemons from your grocery bag, someone else will help you pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other. We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot, and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile at them and for them*

to smile back. For the waitress to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder, and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass. We have so little of each other, now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat," "Go ahead — you first," "I like your hat." AMEN.

Sirach 15:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37, Psalm 119:1-8

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* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dear_Abby

**<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sirach>

*** <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/magazine/poem-small-kindnesses.html>