

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, June 3, 2007
10:30 a.m.

“Even Before Mountains”
Proverbs 8:1-14, 22-31

It has been an interesting couple of weeks on the moral-ethical front in America, beginning with Justice Department Attorney Monica Goodling’s testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, and ending with Attorney Andrew Speaker’s covert flight from Italy on a commercial airliner carrying a potentially lethal form of TB.

I want to talk about these two stories because I think they are worth spending time with this morning, especially in light of today’s stunning reading from the Wisdom literature of Proverbs. Both Goodling and Speaker are young, attractive, smart, well-educated, decent human beings, rising stars in their professional lives with access to power and wealth and every manner of blessing.

Goodling majored in communications at Messiah College, a Christian school in Grantham, Pennsylvania. She enrolled in law school at American University but transferred to Regent, a law school founded by religious leader Pat Robertson with an emphasis on Biblical principles of law. This is a woman who takes her faith seriously, I mean that.

After earning a joint degree in law and public policy in 1999, she worked as a researcher for the Republican National Committee on the Bush campaign then moved to the Justice Department’s press office. After less than a year, she moved again, this time to the Attorney General’s office, working as the White House liaison. There she retained executive office authority over personnel matters, a role expanded in 2006 to include the appointment and dismissal of all Justice Department political appointees other than US attorneys.

According to e-mails, Goodling was involved in planning controversial 2006 US Attorney dismissals. In March 2007, she took an indefinite leave of absence and invoked her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. In late April, the House Judiciary Committee voted overwhelmingly to

grant her immunity and immediately authorized a subpoena. In early May, the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility--its Ethics Unit if you will--began investigating whether Goodling may have made "hiring decisions on Assistant U.S. attorneys based on party affiliation," a clear breach of Civil Service rules.

Goodling appeared before the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, May 23rd. Here's a condensation of Goodling's testimony:

Rep. Robert Scott (D-VA): Ms. Goodling, you indicate that you (quote) "may have taken inappropriate political considerations into account on [hiring decisions]." Do you believe that those political considerations were not just inappropriate, but in fact illegal?

Monica Goodling: That's not a conclusion for me to make.

Scott: Do you believe that they were legal or illegal?

Goodling: I don't believe I *intended* to commit a crime.

Scott: Did you break the law?

Goodling: I know I crossed the line.

Scott: What line ~ legal?

Goodling: I crossed the line of the civil service rules.

Scott: Rules ~ laws. You crossed the line on civil service *laws*, is that right?

Goodling: I believe I crossed the lines. But I didn't mean to.

Monica Goodling is 33 years old.

Andrew "Drew" Speaker attended the United States Naval Academy and went on to receive his undergraduate degree in Finance from the University of Georgia as well as his law degree from the University of Georgia School of Law. After working with the Fulton County District Attorney's Office

and the Oconee County District Attorney's office, he chose to go into private practice so that he could pursue personal injury and family law.

Speaker flew to Europe for his wedding in Greece and a honeymoon trip last month after being notified that he was infected with TB, but said he was not flatly forbidden to travel. Cautious health officials advised, but did not legally prohibit Speaker from leaving.

While in Europe, doctors at the Atlanta-based Center for Disease Control determined that Speaker not only had TB, but an especially dangerous, drug-resistant strain. They contacted him in Italy and told him to turn himself in immediately at a clinic there and not take another commercial flight.

"He was told in no uncertain terms not to take a flight back," said Dr. Martin Cetron, director of the Centers for Disease Control's division of global migration and quarantine. Still, there were no *legal* orders, no laws were broken.

Sitting in street clothes but speaking through a face mask, Speaker told ABC's Diane Sawyer on Friday he felt that the CDC had suddenly "abandoned him." Though there are many centers in Italy that have treated drug-resistant TB, Speaker said he believed that if he did not get to the world-renowned National Jewish Medical and Research center in Denver, he would die. Defying instructions to turn himself in to Italian health authorities, Speaker flew from Rome to Prague to Montreal, rented a car, and came back into the United States through Plattsburgh, New York. Meanwhile, the CDC claims it was working on finding a way for Speaker to get home that would not put the public at risk. All they wanted him to do was wait.

On Thursday of last week, Speaker became the first infected person to be quarantined by the U.S. government since 1963.

Doctors say the chances that other passengers were infected appear low. Speaker's chances for recovery seem good, thank God. He may have contracted the disease while doing mission work in Vietnam. One of Speaker's fellow passengers is quoted to have said, "He stepped on a plane

with 487 people, one of the largest aircraft that Boeing makes, and he put us all at risk, just so he could go get married."

"I don't expect those people to ever forgive me," Andrew Speaker told "Good Morning America." "I just hope they understand that I truly never meant them any harm."

Andrew Speaker is 31 years old.

Monica Goodling didn't *mean* to break the law or disrupt justice. Andrew Speaker didn't *mean* to put hundreds of people at risk. Yet these cases disquiet me to my very bones and I hope they disquiet you because these *are* good young people we're talking about; they are America's best and brightest and they really *didn't* mean anyone any harm.

Where, O where is the public discourse, dare I say the public outcry, on the *ethics* of these situations? By what moral compass were these young people traveling, what code of conduct puts political loyalty or a drive for self-preservation above one's sense of social responsibility to others? "No harm, no foul," does not cut it in the world of Christian ethics. Expediency doesn't cut it. Fear does not cut it. Ends do *not* justify means.

My intent today, my friends, is not to single out two young people in their time of trial, but to lift up the ethical crosses we are called to bear in the name of God, to give you a sense of the standard by which we are called to live. Righteousness in these times takes ferocious courage. And that is just what Jesus expects of us.

So what does our reading from Proverbs have to say to guide us on this path? What, my friends, will *you* do as people of faith when two equally credible values square off in your hearts, when there are two or more right choices and you must decide between them? Wisdom, or Sophia, is considered the feminine side of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. She is an emanation of the Creator, the penultimate moral force in the universe, implanting in the world a sense of rightness and wrongness that preceded even the first whisper of a star.

²²The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.

My friends, when it is your moment of truth, will you recognize it for what it is? When it is a loyalty you must betray, or your life on the line, will you appreciate that it is *God* you must answer to and nothing less? Will you do what is right despite the consequences because you hear Wisdom calling deep within your soul? Will the beauty of Sophia shine through the pain of your choice?

You know, we don't get all that many chances to make life altering moral decisions in this world. When it is your turn, I hope you will think of Wisdom, standing beside the gates of your hearts, crying out:

“To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.

⁵O simple ones, learn prudence;
acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

⁶Hear, for I will speak noble things,
and from my lips will come what is right;

Then listen. Shhhh. Sophia will tell you what to do and you will rejoice,
even through your tears.

Amen.