



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)

## The Beginning of Wisdom

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 12, 2009

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

**Proverbs 1:1-7**

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*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:  
For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
let the wise also hear and gain in learning  
and the discerning acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.  
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Have you heard the questions? I have. Everywhere I turn people around me are asking questions about life and meaning and what sorts of things make for a life well-lived. I don't know if it's the economy, or the difficulty of maintaining families, or the community-destroying whisperers who fill our schools and offices and neighborhoods and churches, or the challenge of raising children, or the breakdown of public trust in institutions, or the lack of deep friendships—or a combination of all these things and more—but for some reason, people seem to be searching for answers to questions having to do with the deep things of life and living well.

In some ways, what we are overhearing in those questions—questions around us and within us—is an ancient, deep, and ongoing conversation about what is good and wise and true in life. (Yoder, xxi) And that conversation comes to life in the book of Proverbs, where we are invited into an imagined household to assume the posture of a child—a child sitting silently as the parent seeks to give instruction on what it means to live wisely and well.

It was on a sunny Malibu Monday morning back in January when the idea for this sermon series from the book of Proverbs first took root. I had gathered with my preaching group for a week of reflection and study. The first thing we did following worship that Monday morning was to hear a presentation from our visiting scholar.

Our scholar this past January was Christine Yoder, who teaches Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. As Christine told us a bit about herself and

her plan to engage with us in a study of the book of Proverbs, my mind drifted for just a moment.

In one of those jet-lagged moments, I was transported back to the den in the house I grew up in Dallas, where I could see myself sitting on the floor leaning back against the sofa. My mother was behind me, and I had been reading from the book of Proverbs—perhaps for the first time. I must have been somewhere between the age of 10 and 13. I don't remember why I formed the judgment I did, but I remember speaking my harshly-delivered critique: "The Proverbs are bunk."

To be honest, I think it had to do with what seemed to me like a Pollyanna view of the world. I think I was equating it with such proverbial wisdom as "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" or "an apple a day keeps the doctor away"—and I had already seen enough to make me suspicious of proverbial wisdom like that.

To her credit, my mother helped to straighten me out that evening, suggesting with deep humility and wisdom that perhaps there was more to the book than I had understood.

No sooner had that unexpected journey back in my mind ended than I heard Christine begin her first presentation, and her opening words haunted me so much that any time-zone change fatigue immediately vanished: "We live in a culture starved for wisdom," she said. And, as you might expect from an expert in wisdom literature, she began to lament that so few people search for wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

Over the next several weeks, I want us to spend some time in the book of Proverbs, and we will find ourselves being plunged right into the heart of ordinary life—into the home or the marketplace or your neighborhood—for according to the book of Proverbs, this is the arena "in which we develop our moral character and work out our faithfulness step by step, day after day." (Yoder, xxi)

What we'll discover is that the book of Proverbs is interested in the same questions that consume us: "How can we discern right from wrong in a world of competing and compelling claims?

What values do we treasure and why?

What makes for strong families and just communities?

What characterizes a good neighbor, a loving partner, or a trusted friend?

How do we understand money, the role of integrity, and the power of speech?

And how do we teach it all to our children?

The book of Proverbs...takes up such questions as part and parcel of the reverent life, and it commends for the journey wisdom born of experiences and the musings of generations who have gone before us—poetry wrought and recited time and again by the people of God." (Yoder, xxi) What Proverbs is trying to do is to get us to reflect on our lives with fresh theological insight and vision by looking at the ordinary around us and telling us what's really going on.

It may seem surprising that a book dedicated to teaching wisdom, "which takes up such everyday matters as relationships, faith, business, money, sex, and alcohol, does so not with a series of recommended 'to-do lists,' innovative strategies, slogans, or clichés, but with *poetry*—exquisite, crafted speech that has been polished and pertinent for centu-

ries.” (Yoder, xxvi) Perhaps the sages know what we do: that navigating life wisely and well is itself nothing less than an art form—and so the (shaping) of good, faithful lives requires speech up to the task.” (Yoder, xxvi)

And so, in the coming weeks, I want us all to sit silently beside the imagined child in the book of Proverbs as the parent begins to train us in wisdom. What that parent is trying to do, you see, is not to *command* us to “fear the Lord,” but rather to paint a picture of wisdom that is compelling enough to inspire us to become people who are “fearers of the Lord,” for if we want to gain wisdom, that is where we begin.

Our passage today—the opening verses of the book of Proverbs—reads a lot like the blurbs you’ll find on dust jackets at the Barnes and Noble. Imagine that you’re picking up the book of Proverbs and considering whether or not you want to buy it as you listen to today’s text from Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message*:

*These are the wise sayings of Solomon,  
David's son, Israel's king—  
Written down so we'll know how to live well and right,  
to understand what life means and where it's going;  
A manual for living,  
for learning what's right and just and fair;  
To teach the inexperienced the ropes  
and give our young people a grasp on reality.  
There's something here also for seasoned men and women,  
still a thing or two for the experienced to learn—  
Fresh wisdom to probe and penetrate,  
the rhymes and reasons of wise men and women.*

What the sages are trying to help us sense is that this book is for all of us—the old and the young—for experienced folks and beginners alike. There is never a point when the wise person will stop listening and learning, so this book which trains us in wisdom spans the ages. And what it promises is that we will be trained in a whole new language—the language of wisdom—a language that teaches people how to be faithful beings and to envision a world of justice and peace.

And, just like learning any language, we’ve got to pay attention. Proverbs gives repeated admonitions to “take heed,” to “listen,” to “incline your ear.” “Such repeated summonses are reminders that language is neither simple nor ever finally mastered. Even the wise must listen again and again.” (Yoder, 3)

And, when the dust jacket has done its work and we’ve bought the book, the first thing we’ll hear is Proverb’s guiding refrain: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Or, as another translation puts it: “Start with GOD—the first step in learning is bowing down to GOD.”

What the sages are inviting us to do is to be filled with awe as we acknowledge that we live in a world created and governed by a sovereign God, and that this God is the source and goal of all true knowledge. “The fear of the Lord” is, after all, less an emotion than it is an affirmation of faith in the sovereignty and goodness of God.

A “fearer of the Lord,” then is one who recognizes that God is God and whose own

life is marked by humble and grateful praise, and that is the type of person that the book of Proverbs is trying to form.

A few weeks ago, I was sitting in a rocking chair on the balcony of the pottery house at Montreat. Alayne and the girls were inside making something while I sat outside watching Martha teach 5 people how to throw a pot on a potter's wheel. It struck me that she was sounding a lot like the parent in the book of Proverbs as she kept calling out to her students: "Listen to me." "I need you to focus." "Pay attention."

As I sat and watched, I could tell which ones were listening and were crafting a vessel of great worth—and I could also tell which ones were refusing her wisdom and choosing their own way.

In the same way, the book of Proverbs is calling to us to pay attention, that we would live lives of wisdom and truth and beauty—that we would be among those who fear the Lord. When you stop to think about it, paying attention to the sages may just be the wisest thing any of us could do during these days of swirling questions about what it means to live wisely and well.

The idea for this sermon series from the book of Proverbs was prompted by the engaging presentation made by Dr. Christine Roy Yoder in January, 2009, to the *Lectio Jubilate Group* meeting in Malibu, CA. In addition to the insights generated through notes taken at that gathering, I have also been greatly helped by Christine's commentary on the book of Proverbs. (*Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).