



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)

The Danger of Fool's Gold

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 19, 2009

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Proverbs 1:8-19

One way of understanding a passage of scripture is by trying to figure out what sort of music would accompany it if you were to set it to music. When I first looked at these verses from the first chapter of Proverbs, I swear I could hear as Don's fingers pressed down the strings against the fret board of his old guitar. And I could also hear his wife's unmistakable West Tennessee twang as she belted out the words to one of their standard songs in the little country church in Puryear, TN.

It was about this time of year in 1986 when I preached for the final time as the student pastor of the Mill Creek CP Church. I had served there for my final two years of college, and I can still remember the generous and gracious spirits of the people who made up that congregation, and I was so fortunate to learn with and from them over those years.

Now the music in that church was something else. I may have told some of you before about the mother/daughter team that functioned as the pianist and song leader. Archie—the mother—her hands literally dancing across the keys of that old piano—played the hymns while her daughter, Cahuenga, banged a tambourine against her hip and led the congregation in singing the hymns. (Can you imagine Bob before us with a tambourine?)

I swear some of the people came to that church not only because of their great music leadership, but also because of their attire. There were rumors that they came straight to the sanctuary from the Katmandu Club in town, though I'm certain that was more speculation than fact.

Many Sundays, though, the musical offerings of Archie and Cahuenga weren't available, and so Don and Donna would step forward to offer some "special music," as we called it then. Don, a well-respected farmer and his wife—a nurse at the county hospital—would stand before the congregation, where Don would sheepishly introduce what they would be singing that day. And more often than not, they would sing a song that I can still hear them singing today—almost 25 years later.

My last Sunday there, Don played that song while Donna sang the words that I'd heard about 20-25 times over the past two years. I have since learned it was one of the Carter Family classics—although Don and Donna had given it their own distinctive flavor. In fact, the only way I can remember it is the way they sang it—with their particular local flavor and West TN twang. Here's what they sang for me on that last Sunday before I headed out into the world:

*Kneel down by the side of your mother, my boy
You have only a moment I know
But stay till I give you this parting advice
It is all that I have to bestow*

And then they'd really belt out the chorus:

*Hold fast to the right, hold fast to the right
Wherever your footsteps may roam
Forsake not the way of salvation, my boy
That you learned from your mother at home*

So if I were going to set this text to music, what you would hear are fingers sliding down the guitar strings as someone sings about “holding fast to the right,” because that song captures the essence of the shift that happens in our text today.

Last Sunday, we looked at how the opening verses of the book of Proverbs read like the blurbs you will find on the dust jacket of some book that you’re thinking about buying. You know how those blurbs are designed to give you some idea of what the book will be about. It makes a promise to you about what you can expect to receive if you actually buy the book.

And so, in the first verses of the book, we discovered together that the book of Proverbs is asking the same sorts of questions that we are asking these days—questions about life and purpose and what it means to live faithfully and well. In those first verses—those dust jacket blurbs—we were told that there is something in this book for everyone—for the old and the young, for beginners and experienced folk alike—and that if we go ahead and buy the book we will be led on a life-long journey in the way of wisdom. And the journey begins and ends in this truth: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7).

The opening verse of our text today, however, assumes that we’ve bought the book, and so we’ve been transported into a family home where we find ourselves (no matter how old or young we may be) assuming the role of the silent and listening child—a child on the brink of adulthood—as we receive instruction in the way of wisdom. This vantage point is the key for understanding the book of Proverbs as a whole. In other words, for the book of Proverbs to form us into “fearers of the Lord,” it makes the assumption that we are willing to sit at the sages’ feet and pay attention to their words.

When you think about it, it’s not surprising that the sages would set this instruction in wisdom within the context of the family, because that’s the primary place where our identities and values are formed. Given that, it only makes sense that we see the family as the natural (some would even say the preferred) place for theological and ethical teaching.

And that’s why the church doesn’t ever want to replace that role in the lives of our families, but we want to do everything that we can to support parents, and grandparents, and neighbors in that critical task of forming children (and adults) in the faith.

So what do we hear when we find ourselves seated in the household? We kind of hear the echoes of that song:

*Kneel down by the side of your (parent), my (child)
You have only a moment I know*

*But stay till I give you this parting advice
It is all that I have to bestow*

At verse 8, the parent begins to teach us in the way of wisdom—and it becomes immediately clear that the parent knows the way the world works. The parent knows that the child is about to head out into the world and there's precious little they can do in the way of protection and teaching when they do. And they also know there's not enough bubble-wrap or sets of ear plugs in the world to protect him as he leaves.

The parent knows well that the voices will start calling to their son as soon as he walks out the front door. These voices—some of them quite compelling—will be competing for the child's attention. (Don't forget—that's us as well. That's our role in the book of Proverbs. We are sitting silently beside the child being trained in the way of wisdom.)

And so the parent keeps saying over and over again: listen, hear, take heed to these words, bind these words on your heart, receive these instructions. It's almost as if Verizon got their motto from the book of Proverbs, where the parent never assumes he has the child's attention and keeps asking time and time again, "Can you hear me now? Are you listening?" There's no doubt the parent understands that if you want to be wise, you've got to pay attention.

So here's what we have opportunity to hear—if we're paying attention: There are 2 ways in life. There is the Way of Life; and there is the Way of Death.

The Way of Life is marked by discipline and righteousness. Throughout the book of Proverbs, the Way of Life is pictured as a straight, light, and level highway.

The Way of Death, on the other hand, is anything but that. It's marked by wickedness and arrogance and foolishness, and it's always pictured as a dark and crooked path where dangers are lurking everywhere.

And, according the book of Proverbs, every step in life is a choice, and each choice has a consequence. And the parent understands that it is in a very real sense a choice between life and death.

When I went away to college, I attended Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX. They had a great forestry department, and since I was planning to spend my life in the woods, that's where I went. And I chose to live in the dorm closest to the forestry building. It was Dorm 14. (Quite an original name, don't you think?)

It didn't take long to discover that my dorm actually did have a pretty original name. It wasn't called Dorm 14 on campus. No, it was called The Zoo. It had been given that name by a magazine that had listed it among the top ten wildest dorms on any college campus at the time.

So there I was, having been sent out from my parents' home to Dorm 14—to the Zoo, and the first Saturday night came and I was hunkered down in my room and I could hear the chaos outside. My room was near the middle of the hall, and when I opened the door, a clear choice opened before me. I could hear the decadence raging from one direction, and relative quiet in the other, and there were voices calling to me from both directions. Which way would I go? I was standing there—a critical choice to be made—and it was in every way a choice with consequences.

And so the sages call to us today: Every step is a choice, and each choice has a consequence. Not all of them will be as stark as the one before me that night in the Zoo. Sometimes the choices are a bit more hidden, or nuanced. And so we've got to be trained in the Way of Life so that we recognize it when it comes, and we've got to see the traps that are out there along the Way that leads to Death.

That's what the parent begins to do in these opening verses. He paints a vivid scene—a compelling scene—of some of the voices that we will hear as we make our way in the world. The voices will beckon us to make choices, and too often they will be luring us with fool's gold. They'll say things to us like “everyone else is doing it,” or “we deserve nice things,” or “no one will ever find out.”

The parent brings to life all of these deadly voices us calling us to venture down the path that leads to Death. The parent does this, however, so that we can see the foolishness and avoid the traps by staying on the path that leads to Life.

So, as they used to sing in Puryear, TN:

*Hold fast to the right, hold fast to the right
Wherever your footsteps may roam
Forsake not the way of salvation, my boy
That you learned from your mother at home*

And you remember what salvation really means, don't you? It really means life. And so, with all due liberties taken, may I suggest we change the song just a bit:

*...Forsake not the Way of **Life**, my child,
That you learned from the **sages** at home.*

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).