



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)
Trusting God with All Your Heart

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

July 26, 2009

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Proverbs 3:1-12

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*My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.
Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.
Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.
Honor the lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.
My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
for the Lord reproves the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.*

This past Spring one of my daughters signed up to play soccer, and I made the novice parental mistake—I checked the box indicating that I was willing to assist her coach, with the operative word being *assist*. What I didn't know is that so few parents check the actual "I will coach" box, that checking "I will assist" is essentially the same thing.

And so, on that fateful night in February, I stood among a raucous group of parents and children and met what would become "my team." It became apparent real soon that the biggest challenge wasn't going to be getting them to learn some things about playing

soccer and having fun. No, it was going to be getting them to respond to their names when I called them.

I will admit that part of that was my fault. In the heat of the game, I would inadvertently lapse into my at-home parental voice, where I would say things like this to my fierce team of competitors: “Watch out, sweetie, someone’s running up behind you.” Or, “Take your time, honey, you’ve got plenty of space.” I’ll be the first to admit that few second grade boys would dare to respond to those names in public.

But though I accept some of the responsibility, the biggest challenge to getting that team to listen was that there were so many things going on around them that they simply couldn’t focus. And so I’d sit down before them before the game or at half-time, and never once did I have the attention of all seven of them at the same time. And so I’d keep saying things like, “I need you to focus,” or “pay attention,” or “please, just look at me for one second.” It was a constant and repeated refrain: “Listen, focus, look here, pay attention.”

I think that’s why I keep nodding my head in recognition every time the parent in Proverbs opens his mouth to give instructions to his son. If you remember, what we find in the book of Proverbs is a parent training his son in the way of wisdom. What he’s trying to do is to form his child into one who fears the Lord. We readers of the book are invited to sit beside the child and be trained in wisdom as well, with the hope that we too will be among those who are “fearers of the Lord.”

And the parent knows that if his son is going to be wise, then he’s got to pay attention. Time and time again, you will hear the parent’s voice calling out to his child: “Listen; hear; bind these words; take heart; take heed to what I say.” In fact, our passage today begins and ends with such a refrain, as the parent calls out for his child’s attention, saying, “My child, do not....”

And once the parent has the child’s attention in our passage, he begins to speak in quick succession 6 different 2-verse commands. The first two commands have to do with urging the child to embrace the parental instruction, while the next four commands call for obedience to God.

In those opening verses, the parent instructs the youth to keep the parental commandments, and it comes with a promise—“If you do so, you will live long and prosper in what you do.”

Not keeping that instruction—or forgetting it—would be foolish, which is the exact opposite of what you hope for in the book of Proverbs.

Many of you have probably heard, I’m sure, the routine that comedian Bill Engvall has been doing for years now. Now I’m translating this into Proverbs language a bit, but Engvall thinks that foolish people really ought to have a sign around their necks that simply read, “I’m foolish.” That way we can recognize foolish folks when we see them so that we can help them get by in life.

In his act, Engvall will describe a number of small scenes where someone is not being too smart, and he’ll end with the refrain: “Here’s your sign.”

For example, he describes the last time he had a flat tire—a completely flat tire—and he pulled his car into one of those side-of-the road gas stations. The attendant walked

out, looked at his car and said, “Did your tire go flat?” “I couldn’t resist,” he said. “So I said: ‘Nope. I was driving around and the other three just swelled up on me. Here’s your sign.’”

The parent in Proverbs wants to put a sign around his son’s neck that reads just the opposite—not “I’m foolish,” but rather one that reads, “I’m wise.” And so he suggests that the child should literally and figuratively embody wisdom. If you look on the outside, you’ll see wisdom. If you look on the inside, you’ll find wisdom there too.

So what does the father encourage his son to do? He suggests that he hang a sign around his neck with the parental instructions written upon it. Like our teachers used to do when we were young, to pin the important words to our chests so that we wouldn’t forget them. The Old Testament describes a number of places and times when something to be remembered and cherished are worn as adornments—as symbols of what you should remember (Yoder, 38).

Alayne did something like this when first Rachel and then Sarah two years later began kindergarten. She gave them a necklace that had a mother holding a child as the pendant, and she told them that they should always remember how much they are loved. And she encouraged them to look at that necklace if they ever started feeling lonely at school, and it became a symbol of her love and care for them. It’s a mother’s ritual way of saying to her child—“Here’s your sign,” and don’t ever forget what it means.

The parent, of course, also wants the youth to embody wisdom on the inside as well, and so he encourages the youth to write the teachings on the “tablet of (his) heart.” I love the way Christine Yoder describes this in her commentary on the book of Proverbs. She writes, “To write on the heart is to make an indelible mark on the center of one’s being, to etch the instructions onto the innermost parts of oneself—to know...wisdom teaching so well that it becomes (a part of you).” (Yoder, 38)

And so, with wisdom hanging around the child’s neck and wisdom written on the tablet of his heart, there is no disconnect between what you see when you look on the outside from what you see in the way of commitments if you look on the inside. It is, in other words, what faith always hopes will happen—it is a wholeness that is marked by an undivided heart.

And then, in verses 5-8, a shift occurs. Now the parent commends obedience to God—encouraging the child to trust God with all your heart—which means to trust God completely. Trust in God, according to Proverbs, takes away our fears and inspires happiness.

And then, with that trust in God as the foundation, the parent goes on to instruct his child to put his money where his heart is—to demonstrate his devotion to God by practicing the spiritual discipline of offering the first fruits. There is no mistaking that this reflects a correct theology of stewardship which always rests on the foundation of trusting God with all your heart.

In a larger sense, though, the parent is really putting the child’s quest for wisdom into the realm of the community again. The path to wisdom, in other words, is not a solitary journey but rather one that leads right through the sanctuary where the community gathers to engage in its rituals and disciplines.

Again, I like what Christine Yoder says about this: “...rituals embody meaning in flesh-and-blood acts. They (form us) as individuals and communities by ordering our lives; enacting and affirming particular meanings and relationships; forming and transforming our identities, thoughts, and behaviors; and, particular in the case of religious rituals, pointing us beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary. Through rituals we locate ourselves in the world” (Yoder, 50).

In just a few minutes, we will gather around the font with Paul and Heather who are already engaged in the task of forming Isabella and Emma as “fearers of the Lord.” And when they bring their daughters to the font, we’ll be asking them questions about their own lives of faith with the promise that their outward appearances and their internal commitments will be marked by wisdom and faithfulness, and we’ll invite them to nurture Isabella and Emma in the faith as well, so that what is written on the tablets of their heart will lead them on the Way to Life.”

And we will give them a sign today—not something to hang around their necks—but a sign traced on their foreheads still dripping with baptismal waters. They will be marked with the sign of the cross as we remind them and us that they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

And then Paul and Heather will spend their lives reminding their children of what we are doing with and to them this morning. And my hope is that they will engage in the ritual of pulling out the candles we will give them, and to light them at home next July and tell again the beautiful story of the day they were baptized.

Each telling, you see, takes it that much deeper into their lives. One day they’ll wake to discover that the story has become part of them, and each breath will repeat the refrain over and over and over again. Every breath in they hear this: “Trust in the Lord.” And each breath out, “with all your heart.” And their very lives will proclaim why they are able to do so: because they belong, in life and in death, to the God who made them and holds them and redeems them. May this God receive all honor, glory, and praise.

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).