



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)

Some Thought Required

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 23, 2009

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Proverbs 26:4-5

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*Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will become a fool yourself.*

*Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes.*

Here's something the sages in the book of Proverbs have been trying to teach us this summer: "If you want to be wise, you have to pay attention."

So here's my question: Were you paying attention when I read our text for today? If so, you're probably still scratching your head, trying to figure out whether *I* flubbed the reading or *you* flubbed the listening. So let's try again:

*Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will become a fool yourself.*

*Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes.*

As a part of my opening devotional at a recent staff meeting, I read this passage to my colleagues in ministry—my treasured friends whose wisdom I have come to trust over the years. I wanted to gauge their reaction to this text—a text which holds conflicting wisdom about whether to answer a fool or not. They're usually pretty astute at such things, and so after reading the two verses and saying a brief word or two, I asked them, "So, should you answer a fool or not?"

I should have known better than to ask them a question. They sat there silently until Bob (who is conveniently away on vacation this morning) suddenly confessed: "That sounds like a trick question." And then, with a simple wave of the hand in my direction, he reminded me that I was the one asking the question: "Should we answer a fool or not?" Leave it to Bob.

What are we to make of this conflicting—indeed fully contradictory—wisdom that comes to us from the sages of Proverbs?

Before we answer that question, let me remind you that the book of Proverbs is trying to shape people who walk in the way of wisdom. The motto of the book is found early in the first chapter, and it is repeated throughout the book in various ways: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." And while there is a healthy dose of fear as we typically understand the word, it really means recognizing and honoring the sovereignty of the God who is over all, as well as recognizing our limitations as part of what God has made.

As we learned in that first chapter, the book of Proverbs is asking the same sorts of questions that we often ask about what it means to live wisely and well. And the book promises us—the wise and the foolish, the young and the old, the experienced and the novice alike—that there is something here for everyone, and that if we want to be wise, we have to pay attention to what the sages are telling us. And remember always, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

And then the book of Proverbs invites us to enter an imaginary household and listen in as a parent trains his child in the way of wisdom. In the first nine chapters of the book, the parent speaks and the youth listens silently, and we (the readers) are invited to sit beside him as he listens.

We were there to hear the father warning his child in those first nine chapters that there are two ways in life—the way of life and the way of death. And the father does his best to train his child to learn to recognize the traps that are out there, the voices that would be there calling him to turn aside. The father encouraged his son to avoid those snares and to resist those tempting voices and to remain on the path that leads to life.

And the parent knows the way the world works. He knows that the world is filled with voices and people and situations that will do their best to lead his child astray, and so he paints a world of stark contrasts for his child. There is no mistaking in those first nine chapters what is foolish and what is wise—at least not if you’re paying attention. As each chapter in that first section comes and goes, the youth’s exit from the household draws closer. And, while he couldn’t simply command his child to stay on the right path, the father had done all that he could do. He had shown his child the way that leads to life, and he had sent him out the door wearing garments of wisdom on the outside and with wisdom written on the tablet of his heart on the inside.

At the end of the first nine chapters, the youth has left the household and we see him standing at the crossroads, where he is forced to decide which way to go. He has heard two invitations, one to the house of wisdom, and one to the house of folly. And while there is no doubt about which invitation leads to life, the section closes before we know which invitation the youth accepted there at the crossroads.

And so at chapter 10, a huge shift occurs in the book of Proverbs. We are no longer sitting in the imaginary household being trained in the way of wisdom by the parent. If you look closely, you’ll see in this section that the parent’s voice has fallen away and we readers are no longer the child being addressed. No, we are now being asked to participate in wisdom-making ourselves.

By way of this literary structure, the book of Proverbs shifts the responsibility for discerning wisdom from the father of the first nine chapters to the readers—to us. It becomes our responsibility to discern and choose the wise thing in any given situation, which only makes sense for a book whose purpose is to form wise people (Yoder, 110). What the book of Proverbs is asking us to do is to participate in wisdom-making ourselves.

That, of course, can be a tricky thing. Whether we like it or not, it soon becomes clear in the book of Proverbs that wisdom doesn’t always know what the wise thing is. As Christine Yoder points out, “Divergent proverbs occur side by side, or nearly so, without

reflection....The sages' interweaving of countering claims, none of which they discount or trivialize, reveals that wisdom does not afford only one perspective on wealth or poverty, or, for that matter, many things" (Yoder 111-112). In its use of contradiction, we learn from Proverbs what it means to live as moral agents with choices, and that no one answer will work in every moment, and that we must hold onto slices of truth that are at odds with each other and discern what is the wisdom needed in a given moment in time.

When you think about it, we all hold slices of truth that are at odds with one another. I suspect you have found yourself with some opportunity to decide about, and someone has spoken this proverb to you: "The one who hesitates is lost." What they're doing with that wisdom is trying to help you to recognize that some opportunities are lost if you wait too long in deciding what you're going to do.

And they're right, of course. But before you know it, someone else may speak another word to you about the same opportunity: "Look before you leap." By speaking that word of wisdom, that person is trying to help you not to rush into anything without taking the time to consider all of the implications of your decision.

So which is the wise thing to do? Would the wise thing be looking before you leap, or would it be going ahead lest in your hesitation you miss out? Ultimately, both of those words hold a slice of truth, and you have to be wise enough to know which to apply at the right time.

The beginning of school offers us another great example of how we hold slices of truth that are at odds with one another. I have lost count of the number of times that I have seen two parents in the same household at different places as the summer has drawn to an end. With school beginning this week, several parents around here who are anxious for the end of the constant stream of "I'm bored; there's nothing to do; he hit me first" litany are ready for this word of wisdom as the school day schedule returns: "Out of sight; out of mind."

Others, however, are at the opposite place. They are acutely aware of how a full school day apart will cause them to miss their children terribly, and the word they cling to is this: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Which is the wise word to speak to a parent (or a child) this week? Is it "out of sight; out of mind," or is it "absence makes the heart grow fonder?"

These verses from our passage today are the best-known examples of the contradictions found throughout the book of Proverbs. We hold these slices of truth, and it may not surprise you to learn that these two verses almost cost the book of Proverbs a place in the Bible, because it seemed too full of contradiction to hold together in a meaningful way.

But remember: the book of Proverbs is attempting to shape us into wise people—to form us as those who fear the Lord—to enable us to participate in wisdom-making ourselves. It's not simply trying to get us to parrot back the answers that we've been given but rather to require something of us, to invite us to use our minds and our hearts and our senses to discern what the wise thing is in any given moment.

As for the particular contradiction in today's text, should you answer a fool or not? "On the one hand, if you respond to fools, you risk being ignored, hated, harmed, and become 'like (them).' On the other hand, you dare not let fools have the last word lest they

(and others) arrogantly mistake their folly for wisdom” (Yoder, 254).

I suspect you’ve had moments where that decision stared you in the face. Perhaps you’ve listened to some fool prattle on about some foolishness, but you thought the wise thing to do was simply to remain silent. You were trusting that others would dismiss what was being spoken as the foolishness it was.

But another time, you may have discerned that your silence was just what that foolishness needed to be thought of as wisdom, and so you spoke up in direct answer to the fool’s folly. The real wisdom comes in discerning which slice of truth is the right wisdom for the situation in which you find yourself.

Wisdom, you see, requires some thought. I’ve been thinking about that a lot as the education season begins. As the new church school year begins on the second Sunday of September, that’s the sort of education I hope we offer. I hope that we will offer students here an environment where they can explore the questions they have, where they can wrestle with what it means to be faithful and to live wisely and well, and that we never create a place where there is a time to stop learning. From the cradle to the grave, the life of faith—especially one in the way of wisdom—requires continued learning, which means we’ve got to keep discerning what the wise thing is for the right time, and it means that we can’t simply teach “answers,” but rather a whole way of life shaped in the way of God.

Many of you have seen some of the data gathered through our congregational visioning process over the past several months. One of the things we heard clearly was the desire to broaden the types of music sung in our worship together. The song we will sing in just a moment is not only a direct response to that congregational desire, but it also captures what a life shaped in the way of wisdom might be like: *O God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you. O God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you.* (What you may hear when you sing those words is the refrain from Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”)

And I will seek you in the morning, and I will learn to walk in your ways. (Do you hear the echo? There are two paths in life: the path of life and the path of death. Your way, O God, is the way that leads to life.)

And step by step you’ll lead me, and I will follow you all of my days. (That, of course, is exactly what the book of Proverbs is hoping we will do—to walk on the path of life in the way of wisdom all of our days—from birth to death.)

When the new church school season dawns, I hope that you will be among those who gather to study and learn together. Whether you are old or young, new to the faith or come with many years behind you, even whether you are foolish or already wise, I hope that you will find a place where you can continue to grow—step by step—in the way of God. There are classes for all ages, including some great new opportunities for adults this season. Find a place to study and grow so that you will be ready for the moments of discernment that surely will come day after day.

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).