

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
August 18, 2024 – 13 Pentecost  
Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; Matthew 7:21-29  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I would like to speak about wisdom. Wisdom is a theme that runs through today's lessons from the Old Testament, including the psalm, as well as our New Testament readings from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and Matthew's Gospel.

Our first reading is from the book of Proverbs. This book is an anthology of writings by many men and women from various walks of life and different periods of history. The purpose of this collection is to provide people with instructions for living prudent and pious lives. It includes what we think of when we think of a proverb, and we still use expressions that come from the book of Proverbs. For instance, we speak of "ill-gotten gains," a phrase from the proverb "ill-gotten wealth is of no avail, but righteousness saves from death" (Proverbs 10:2 – Tanakh translation). We find references in the New Testament to the book of Proverbs. For example, in the First Letter of Peter we read this advice to Christians: "maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins" (4:8), a reference to Proverbs (10:12): "hatred stirs up strife, but love covers up all faults."

The book of Proverbs contains much more than short sayings about life, as we see from our passage this morning. But before looking more closely at that reading, I want to speak about a saying that we find at the beginning of the book of Proverbs and a few verses after this morning's passage – something quite familiar to us from the psalms: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge [or wisdom]" (Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10). The portion of Psalm 34 that we read today contains two references to fear of the Lord: "Fear the Lord, you that are his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing" (verse 9) and "Come, children, and listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (verse 11).

Have you ever been afraid of someone who has threatened to harm you or actually harmed you? If you have, you know that while such fear has survival value in preparing us to fight or flee from danger, it may seem to you – as it does to me – an inappropriate description of our loving connection with God and not a feeling that will help us grow in love for God. The problem here is one of translation from one language to another, from Hebrew to English. The Hebrew verb conveys the feelings of awe and reverence rather than fear as I have described it. So, when we read about "fearing God," we should make our own translation to "revering God" or "being in awe of God." This is very different, and it is entirely appropriate to our relationship with God.

Reverence and awe are right reactions to coming into the presence of the utterly holy, profoundly other, and deeply mysterious God. Reverence and awe in relation to God are indeed the right beginning to our quest to bring ourselves into closer and closer union and alignment with the love and actions of God. It is good to remember who we are speaking about when we speak about God. We are referring to God, who is the Creator of all that is, everything within our scope of knowledge and everything beyond "this fragile earth, our island home." We are referring to Christ, sometimes called Christ Pantokrator, the ruler of all, and the judge of all humanity when Christ returns in glory at the end of our age. We are referring to the Holy Spirit, who empowers the followers of Jesus with spiritual gifts, power and faith, who gives life to the Church, and who enlivens all that has life. When we remember who God is, we might question asking God to help us find a parking place, as some do.

Back to our lesson from Proverbs. This is the first part of a description in poetry of two banquets, one prepared by Lady Wisdom and the other by Lady Folly. Highly accomplished and industrious Lady Wisdom provides a sumptuous feast to which everyone is invited, a feast of wisdom to sustain the soul and give guidance for life. In contrast, Lady Folly is described as an ignorant and idle woman who tries to lure passersby to her feast with these words: “stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten furtively is tasty” (Proverbs 9:17). Her feast of forbidden pleasures leads to death. Wisdom leads to life, and folly leads to death. We find this theme repeated often in scripture.

Today’s passage from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians continues the theme of living wisely: “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time” (5:15-16). Being foolish is the opposite of understanding God’s will. When we read “understand what the will of the Lord is,” we need to remind ourselves that “understanding” is more than a mental state in scripture, more than intellectual knowledge. Understanding is expressed through action. Writing a book or preaching a sermon about who God is and what God wills is not necessarily the same as “understanding” in this sense. Just as a carpenter isn’t a carpenter because he knows about wood or a cook is a cook because she knows about food, so the wise person isn’t wise because he or she knows about God’s will. To use a non-scriptural proverb as a comparison: “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” The proof of our understanding of God is in the living.

This is a lesson taught by Jesus many times in many ways. Jesus sometimes instructed people about the difference between wisdom and folly by using parables. A well-known example of this is recorded in the passage from Matthew’s Gospel that we heard today (7:24-27). Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

What are “these words of mine” that Jesus refers to? The Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew’s Gospel, chapters 5 through 7. Jesus is referring to profound teaching about what it means to follow him: love your enemies; turn the other cheek; give alms and pray in secret and not to impress other people; serve God, not wealth; strive for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness; do not judge others; do to others as you would have them do to you. To show our understanding of these teachings by the way we live is a life-long project. We will often fall short, of course, but Jesus reminds us to keep striving, to keep working on the building of a house with a firm foundation.

Finally, I would like to borrow and bend a popular “proverb” we are familiar with today: “It’s not what you know, but who you know.” Of course, this is often used with regard to success in employment or other types of achievement and refers to using one’s network of personal contacts to one’s own advantage. I would suggest that we could use this saying about leading a Christian life. What is most important is who we know, and that means Jesus Christ. When we know Jesus, when we love Jesus, when we hold on to his words and remember his life and all that he did, we have the one true foundation of knowledge that has the power to set us on the road to following his teaching in action in our lives. When we stay connected to Jesus in prayer, especially when it is difficult to do what he has taught, Jesus may very well help us do what we could not do ourselves. He has promised to give us the help of his Holy Spirit to keep us on the right path, walking in his way of love. His love for us will surely help us to love one another, the commandment he gave his disciples the night before he died. May we make the most of our time and learn to know Jesus, to love Jesus, and to follow him more and more each day. In his holy name. Amen.