

“Wisdom’s Joy” GPPC 6-16-19
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, John 16:12-15

On this Sunday we celebrate the Trinity, God as three-in-one. And we baptize two children (at the 11:00 a.m. service). And one of the lectionary readings suggested is from the Book of Proverbs. I don’t preach from this book very often, but it is a rich resource for living as Christians.

I suspect you and I know our lives are not perfect. Despite good intentions, all of us are sinners who live morally imperfect lives with plenty of gray areas. But to make his moral points clear, the writer of Proverbs writes under a halogen light that illumines clear and painful contrasts between good and evil. For example, all of chapter 7 is his warning about the dangerous seductions of the “Loose Woman,” (maybe a way of speaking not just about the temptation of sexual sin but about unwise living in general). Then in the 8th chapter sometimes characterized as the story of “Lady Wisdom” or “Woman Wisdom,” he provides the sharp contrast we look at today.

Jeff Paschal

Think about wisdom for a few minutes. Notice that Proverbs personifies wisdom as “Lady Wisdom” or “Woman Wisdom.” Why? Bible scholar Ellen Davis says, “...Wisdom is more like a ‘she’ than an ‘it.’ Wisdom can be sought and found only as a relationship is ‘found’—when we prepare our hearts for receiving the gift of the other, when we attend carefully to the responsibilities that relationship entails.” (Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, 64.)

Though it’s often helpful to acquire knowledge, wisdom is more than simply amassing knowledge, gathering an impressive array of facts, or even notable degrees. I know people with doctorates who I would not trust to watch my cat for the weekend. And I know people who managed to squeak by with a high school diploma with whom I would gladly entrust my life.

At the same time, I do not wish to denigrate the gathering of knowledge or the qualifications connected with higher education. If I’m facing major surgery, I want a board-certified surgeon. A lawsuit? A Martindale-Hubbell AV-list attorney or one of those Super-attorneys lurking about our congregation. Building 100-story skyscraper? A real

Jeff Paschal

architect. Knowledge and expertise are needed, and they have their place.

But they are not actually what the Bible and what the writer of Proverbs call “wisdom.” Wisdom is something else.

We also value power or wealth, not for their own sake but for the sake of being able to get things done, to accomplish something, or to have something. Yet without wisdom raw power quickly turns to pride, and oppressive control of other people, and cruelty. And wealth simply turns to greed and excess.

And then there is technology. Beth and I have watched several seasons of a disturbing British science fiction TV series on Netflix called “Black Mirror.” Anybody seen this series? We’re absolutely fascinated and horrified by it. Basically it’s set just a few years from now, and each episode highlights where the power of technology might lead us.

In one episode, each character has his or her popularity rating visible on a computer-generated graph. As you go about your day, you try to have people press “like” for you and raise your rating and your status. And, of course, conversely you don’t want to do anything that

Jeff Paschal

would cause your rating and status to be decreased. How well do you think this goes? Not very. How similar does it sound to Facebook now? A little bit. And I like Facebook.

In another episode, a device is invented so that our innermost thoughts and our most secret memories are no longer locked away as private but by using some new technology they're able to be viewed by say, insurance companies, or say, police detectives.

In another episode, a person's body has been terribly injured in a car accident, but her mind is then able to be saved by implanting it in a teddy bear. Now the woman cannot die, and she has very limited speech—just a few words. But her fiancé's life continues as any normal human being's might. How do you think this ends?

Of all the dozens of episodes we watched, I think only a couple actually had happy endings.

Knowledge, power, wealth, and technology—none of these measures up to wisdom. Wisdom is something more precious. In fact, one pastor says, “[Chapter 8] in Proverbs personifies Wisdom, and here on Trinity Sunday we can see in this personification of Wisdom a

Jeff Paschal

depiction of the Holy Spirit.” (Douglas M. Donley, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 26.) And as Jesus says in John’s gospel the Spirit is Truth, and the Spirit will guide us into “all truth.” There’s a lot at stake here.

As the writer of Proverbs says, “Wisdom is better than jewels.” In Proverbs 8, Wisdom actually lays out her credentials. She says, “I’ve been with God from the very beginning, before the earth was formed, oceans filled, mountains raised, and boundaries set. I was there from the foundations of the earth.” But, again, what exactly *is* wisdom?

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” says the Psalmist and the writer of Proverbs. “Fear” here is less about being frightened and more about reverence, respect, or awe. Reverence, respect, and awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

This is the *beginning* of wisdom, not the full definition. So we slowly begin unwrapping our understanding. In the Bible, wisdom is built upon the solid foundation of reverence, respect, and awe of the Lord. We begin our journey toward wisdom by first understanding that there is One who is much greater than we are. One who created us and everything in the universe. One who deserves our reverence, respect, and

Jeff Paschal

awe. One who deserves our obedience and our worship. This One is God.

But scan the internet, the TV, the newspapers, and our own lives and see what happens when we forget the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Replacement of truth with lies. Cheating instead of fairness. Childish insults instead of vigorous dialogue. Brutality in place of compassion. Lawlessness instead of no one being above the law. Notice how we can be knowledgeable, powerful, wealthy, and technologically-savvy but not wise. If we lose our sense of gratitude to God and our sense of accountability to God, then we are liable to say or do anything.

But the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. That's the beginning, but more is required, a relationship with Woman Wisdom needs to be built and deepened over the years. As the Bible scholar said "we prepare our hearts for receiving the gift of the other, when we attend carefully to the responsibilities that relationship entails." How does this happen? Prayer. Worship. Study. Reflection. Service. Community.

Jeff Paschal

Repetition. Over time wisdom is a kind of skill for living life to its fullest.

Part of the church's role is to be a community that teaches and embodies wisdom. Yes, I know the members and their pastors sometimes make mistakes and act foolishly. Nonetheless, together we are to teach, learn, grow, and embody wisdom.

And here's the interesting thing about where this all leads. When we think about wisdom, don't we often imagine someone who is especially serious or stern? But notice how wisdom refers to herself in Proverbs. She says, "I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." Rejoicing can actually be translated as "laughing" and "playing." This is where wisdom actually leads us, not to dour, super-serious lives. But to the laughter and play of lives attuned to God and God's will.

Many years ago a major sports figure found his life blown apart by a scandal of his making. At the time many people condemned him, and, indeed, his actions were foolish. But I recall one sportswriter basically said he was not going to condemn him. Neither was he going to

Jeff Paschal

commend him. Instead, he offered a quote, a kind of challenge that the man amend his ways, a quote which I couldn't find, but I think I remember. He said, "The happiest lives are lived by people with the cleanest hands."

By that, I don't think he was pretending that we never sin or that we can somehow earn God's love. That's not true. But he was pointing out where wisdom leads us—to joyful lives. The strange irony is that as we seek to obey God we actually find freedom, fun, play, and even joy.

Graeme and Natalie don't know this yet, but today we're promising to help lead them toward wisdom. Their parents are going to lead them, but we're promising to lead them too. We're all making solemn promises to nurture them in Christian faith. In the old language it was "the fear of the Lord." But in and beneath those promises is something else—gladness, a lightness that comes with following, a clarity that comes from knowing the One who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, a joy that comes from knowing who we are and whose we are and why we are here, to love and be loved and to be God's instruments of love.

Jeff Paschal

Graeme and Natalie, welcome to the church, this school for wisdom. And how can I say this best? It's also lot of fun. In the name of the loving Parent, the Son, and the laughing, playing Spirit of Wisdom.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal