

A Little Wisdom

^{NRS} **Proverbs 1:20** Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.²² "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"²³ Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.

^{NRS} **James 3:4-5**⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

^{NRS} **Mark 8:33-37** But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

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This year is the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth and it's an appropriate time to look back at the life and teaching of Calvin, which is exactly what the adult class is doing for a few weeks. It's important that we don't forget the work, the struggles, and the wisdom of those who were important in shaping our denomination. On the other hand, it's important that we don't put John Calvin – or any of the other reformers – on a pedestal that's too high and lofty. John Calvin was a brilliant mind and a tireless worker, but he was a product of his times and his teaching is not without error. Nonetheless, we Presbyterians, and all others in the Reformed tradition, owe him immensely for his insight, his scholarship, and his courage.

Calvin was born into a time when less than one percent of the people could read or write. There was almost no opportunity to read because all books were copied by hand, making them horribly expensive. A rich noble might have a dozen or two books - and be known for the size of his library. There was no purpose in anyone else learning to read because they would never have access to something to read. But with the invention of moveable type and the printing press, the world changed at a fantastic rate. With relatively cheap books, people yearned to read. Pamphlets and posters could be mass produced and distributed. Almost overnight, the idea of public literacy became important. With the technology of the printing press, it became feasible and important to translate the Bible into the common language. The whole landscape of society and religion changed radically - and changed forever. Everywhere the Reformation spread, it brought with it fervent support for public education to spread literacy, and the other side of the coin, fervent support for the Bible to be translated into the common language.

All of that history came flooding back to me as I read the lesson from Proverbs this past week. Who is this Wisdom who cries out on the streets? Down through the years there has been a lot of discussion about this person called Wisdom. Is this God? Is this the Holy Spirit? Is this Jesus? Some have even suggested that there are four persons in the Godhead: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Wisdom. We can discuss that this evening as we look at the understanding of God and Trinity as seen in the *The Shack* and in Scripture.

Beyond the person and divinity of Wisdom, the concept of wisdom needs to be re-addressed in our lives. We need to take a fresh look at wisdom. Wisdom is the thoughtful

application of knowledge to our lives. Today, we hear some talk about knowledge, but less about wisdom. There's an anti-intellectual streak that runs through our society. While we talk about how we're changing to a knowledge-based economy, we do less and less to support and increase knowledge. Our newspapers devote page after page to how well high school students perform in sports, but very little reporting on how students perform in the classroom. Our news programs carry less and less depth while tossing out sound bites and reporting on viewer opinion polls. And in our churches, more and more of us know less and less scripture. When you look at the content of our video games and our television programming – and then consider the amount of time we spend watching them, it's a wonder that many of us are any smarter than your average pound of liver mush! If we don't impart knowledge, how can we expect people to live wisely? So, this passage from Proverbs speaks to us today when Wisdom asks, "How long will you love being simple?" Just a few verses beyond today's reading, Wisdom warns that those who hate knowledge, won't listen to counsel, and do not choose the fear of God, will eat the fruit of their way. They will suffer the consequences.

The question before each of us is will we seek knowledge? Will we read our Bibles? Will we attend Sunday School and worship, and will we pay attention to the knowledge offered there? Will we seek to grow in knowledge and grow in understanding by engaging in Bible study classes and spiritual development opportunities? Will we move beyond membership - and take up discipleship? And will we strive for wisdom to apply what we learn, in wise and faithful ways?

Looking at the text from the book of James, we read how the tongue is a small member of the body, yet it can do huge things. James compares the tongue to how a small flame can set a whole forest ablaze. How true this is! On the one hand, the casual put down, the off hand remark that diminishes someone's worth, the whining complaint about some minor thing – can cut someone to the core, can erode their confidence and their feeling of self-worth, and can weaken their reputation beyond proportion if someone else overhears. On the other hand, few things empower and strengthen as much as saying, "Thank you," "I love you," or, "I forgive you." The tongue can be a needle - a needle that sews relationships together, or a needle that jabs and wounds.

But this business of the tongue isn't just about verbal speech. When we pass on emails that spread love and beauty, our tongue can work powerful good. When we pass on emails that we assume are true because they support our viewpoint, or because they play on our fears, we are often passing on misinformation. Not every description of other people, whether they are Mormons, or Frenchmen, or Latinos, or Muslims, or Texans, or Catholics, or some other "other than us" is accurate or true. We live in a world where there are some bad people, but not every internet story about the misbehavior of politicians of the other party is true. Not every rumor about government oppression is founded on fact. Some are just outright bigotry and hatred. Use knowledge and wisdom before you pass stuff along. Use some wisdom to see if you really have knowledge. Is it rumor or fact? And what is the wisest location for the message? Spread to friends, or in the electronic trash basket? Before you pass on something that you've heard, before you hit the "forward" and the "send" button, consider what sort of forest fire you might be igniting. Will the message illuminate the path of faith and love for neighbor - or will it ignite fear and anger? Choose wisely.

Our third text this morning contains one of the sharpest rebukes given by Jesus in the gospels. Peter, energetic, impetuous, and enthusiastic, Peter has just declared that Jesus is the anointed one, the expected Messiah. Peter has been insightful and bold in his declaration. Then Jesus speaks plainly about the rejection, the suffering, and the death that lie before him. Peter can't stand it. This is no way for God's anointed to be treated. And it isn't the sort of treatment that God's anointed ought to expect or accept. "Demand respect. Take and use the power that is rightfully yours. Lead! Rule!" And Jesus rebukes Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" How those words must have stung! "You're focusing your attention on human things, not divine things."

Peter must have been feeling emotional whiplash. One minute he's boldly getting it right. The next minute he's receiving a public scolding for being the devil's own tool.

What follows can sound both cryptic and disturbing. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" Denying ourselves sounds pretty depressing and uncomfortable in our consumer oriented, instant gratification society. Taking up a cross sounds painful and masochistic, downright sick. "Those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save their life" sounds like a call to seek martyrdom, die for Jesus to get to heaven. Gaining the whole world and forfeiting one's life sounds a bit like the parable of the rich man in hell asking Lazarus to bring him an iced Perrier.

If we read this passage entirely in the light of final judgment and eternal destination, we will hear, "suffer now so that you won't suffer later." But there is **more** to be learned here. Here and now, today and every day, move your focus from human things to divine things. Don't worry so much about knowing what's in fashion and spend more time considering eternal values. It's less important whether raspberry tea is the latest taste sensation - and always, eternally, more important that people have enough to eat. It's less important that I have the new tri-colored blooming butterfly bush in my garden - and always, eternally, more important that people can plant food crops. It's fun, it's entertaining, to watch some of my favorite programs and movies - and always, eternally, more nourishing for my mind and spirit when I spend time in Bible study. It's all too easy to get lost in the trivial pursuits of daily life and wake up thirty years later, wondering where all of the time went, wondering why your life doesn't have more meaning, wondering why the world isn't better. But if you lose - if you put aside - the life of meaningless concerns, petty issues, and trite fleeting fashion, then you can save time, you can save your life, for purpose and meaning and worth.

When you pick up a cross and carry a burden, you may teach a child, deliver meals to the homebound, try to bring employers and jobs to the area, hold the hand of the dying, vaccinate children against disease, build decent housing for families, or share the good news of God's love in any of a thousand other ways. At any point, you can look back and say, "I made a difference." Yes, you can gain the whole world. You can know hundreds of baseball statistics, have seen every Spielberg movie, always know the latest gossip on the Hollywood stars, or have eaten at all of the popular restaurants. But is there lasting value? It's not a matter of one or the other. Jesus doesn't expect us to be grim and dour, always having our nose in our Bible, or our nose in somebody else's face telling them to believe or burn. But at the end of the day, at the end of the year, at the end of your life, what will be remembered? That you never missed an episode of ER, or that you never missed an opportunity to be kind? That you helped yourself, or that you helped others? That you turned inward and lost your life, or that you turned outward and found your life? Amen