

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 18, 2022

Proverbs 3:1-4, 13-18

My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for the 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 favour and high regard
in the sight of God and of people.

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
Wisdom is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honour.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen

In 1997 Leo Bidez received a call from his academic advisor at Clemson University. 78 years old at the time, he was without a doubt the eldest of her list of advisees.

25 years earlier Leo and his wife Sally had moved to a quaint college town on a lake in upstate South Carolina. The move had situated them only a short drive from their middle daughter and her husband and their soon to be family. Leo and Sally bought a boat and season tickets to college football and began adding to their wardrobe a particularly handsome shade of burnt orange.

As a young man Leo earned a degree in chemical engineering from Auburn University and spent his career with DuPont, first as a supervisor on the Manhattan Project and later as manager of several plants across the eastern and midwestern United States. After settling in Clemson Leo enrolled in a political science course, taking advantage of a program that allowed for retirees to complete coursework tuition free. He liked the class, so he took another and then another. He felt like it kept his mind sharp, he would say. It was like calisthenics for his brain, he would say. What's more, he found that he loved political science.

So more than two decades later after commencing his study, Leo received the call from his advisor. "Well, Leo, it turns out that you are only three credits short of graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. You just need to take a foreign language course and a physical education course and

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one more elective; and I've spoken with our department head, and given your 78 years of age we are going to exempt you from the physical education course. Given what we already know to be the difficulty that you have with foreign language, we are going to exempt you from your foreign language course; and so you just need one more elective to graduate with a degree.”

So on December 18, 1998, at the age then of 79 years old, my grandfather became the eldest undergraduate of Clemson University. He was the only graduate amongst the thousands that walked that day to receive a standing ovation as he made his way slowly across the stage.

There are many lessons that one can glean from my grandfather, but perhaps the most enduring for me has been that the pursuit of knowledge or wisdom, as it were, is a lifelong task. It was true for him in academia; it is also true for us on our journeys of faith. The writer of Proverbs knew this quite well. Wisdom was something that was pursued by the Hebrews, something that was deeply valued, not just education, but wisdom. All around them there were those who thought and wrote and spoke dualistically, but the Hebrews did not. The Hebrews understood what it meant to hold competing ideas in tension with one another.

Proverbs, it turns out, is one of the places where a collection of these wisdom poems was put together for us, spoken of course you know for centuries, and then finally at some point in time people started compiling them. And so we have now, right at the center of our holy text, this book of wisdom literature. Perhaps you heard there right at the end the description of wisdom as a woman and as a tree. She is planted. She has deep roots. “Happy are those,” the scripture tells us, “that lay hold of this tree of this wisdom.”

The people who would have heard these proverbs spoken aloud had a different way of understanding what it meant to be wise. There were three specific areas where they believed one could glean wisdom from beyond the spoken word of text. The first they believed, the people of Israel did, they believed that the elders were their first source of wisdom.

They believed that if you had survived this life, then you had wisdom to share.

Each person then brought unique wisdom to the community. That's difficult to proclaim now, or difficult for us to imagine, amid a society that venerates youth. It's important for us, though, to see in the ways in which our ancient brothers and sisters of the faith understood. If you had survived you had something to share.

Another source of wisdom—skilled artisans. The belief amongst the Hebrew people was that that if you made something with your hands, if you could take say some clay and shape it into a vessel, if you could take some wood and shape it into something that could be eaten upon or sat in, if you could use your hands to create something from seemingly nothing, then you were wise. That's difficult for us to say and to claim in a society that venerates words. The louder one is, the more fervently they speak, the more attention we pay, the more ratings go up, except not for the people of God in this time. Skilled creative people, they were wise.

And beyond elders and beyond skilled artisans, the Hebrew people believed that you could learn a great deal from the natural world, that to move outside and to be amongst God's creation, there was much to learn—many lessons. In Proverbs later the ant will become a focus. Much to learn, it turns out, for the

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Hebrews in observing the ant—the ant’s industriousness, sense and pattern of time. There was wisdom in the natural world.

The further you get into Proverbs, and this is interesting, the further you get into Proverbs, the more liminal space there is. We're in chapter three this morning, but you can go on and look for yourself. I hope you will. And the further you go the more qualified and relative things become. Good becomes much more complex, much more nuanced. As I told you the Hebrews were surrounded by dualistic folk, and yet they were wise to claim the nuances, the tension that is held in God's world.

But they were fervent about seeking wisdom. So I wonder for us this day what it looks like for us to reflect on their spirit. What does it look like for us, the people that God has seen fit to call to Idlewild Presbyterian Church in 2022, to seek wisdom in the people around us and the world around us and even in Holy Scripture? Well, it seems that the search for wisdom necessitates a few things: the first and probably the most important is that as one that seeks wisdom, the seeker must take a posture of humility.

Wisdom begins from a place where a seeker confesses that they want for knowledge that is beyond them. Epictetus says this, “It is impossible to learn that which you think you already know.”

If you are convinced that you already know something, you are prevented from learning it. If you are convinced that you know, you won't ask questions. If you are convinced that you know, then you cannot be corrected.

All knowledge, all wisdom therefore, must begin from a place of humility. Socrates was not considered wise because of what Socrates knew, but because of what he knew he didn't know. That's why the Socratic method is rooted in asking questions. Certainty, it turns out, is the antithesis of wisdom. One must begin from a different place. That's why here at Idlewild we champion the questions. I think that's important. If you are new to this community, you need to know that you have not walked into a community of faith that has all the answers. Far from it. The pursuit of knowledge necessitates questions; it necessitates curiosity and openness. It is a path that we travel together, and the writers of Proverbs knew it, and Paul knew it as well. As complicated as Paul was as an author of scripture and letters that we call holy, he also knew what it meant to pursue wisdom. We often try to say that Paul was kind of unequivocal in his certainty about things; but in an often repeated text, First Corinthians 13, Paul says this, “For we know only in part and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully even as I have been fully known.”

As people of faith the pursuit of wisdom necessitates an acknowledgement that we believe that there will always be that which is beyond our understanding.

But we also claim that with that acknowledgement comes divine benefit. Pursuing wisdom, it turns out, will make it easier to navigate our world. It'll make our world less frustrating for us, not because we don't see the brokenness around us but because we understand how difficult and how necessary it is to hold up competing ideas at the very same time.

Pursuing wisdom will also connect us across differences. Wisdom, it turns out, is the most ecumenical of all our traditions. It assumes that we benefit from studying other cultures, other religions, other traditions.

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For the Hebrews there was no distinction between sacred and secular; there was only wisdom. When Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life,” what he is saying is anywhere you find truth there you will find me. And so the pursuit of wisdom connects us across divides that our community, our culture, would tell us exist.

Pursuing wisdom ultimately shapes us into the people that God has called us to be. Or as Brueggemann puts it speaking specifically about how we engage the text, “In the end ethical interpretation of the Bible means to think critically about how our practices of textual engagement might help us to become both more human and more humane. We are constantly crafting and recrafting ourselves, and the goal is to do so in such a way that we contribute, even if only incrementally, more to the good in the world than to the bad.”

So we return to the question, why study.

Well here at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, as people of faith, we engage in Christian Formation so that we might be situated, we might situate ourselves, in a place of curiosity, that we might take on a posture of humility, that we might together embody curiosity and humility in a world that seems to not value those as much as it used to.

The wise person engages the world with wonder and with awe, and they are positive that such a posture will yield wisdom. That's why we hand out Bibles to second graders. It's why we ask you to bring your children and yourself to Christian Formation opportunities, maybe here on Sunday morning or throughout the week. We study because we believe our study and our reflection is shaping us and reshaping us to be the people of God here and now. We give Bibles not just for ceremony but because we believe that over time holy texts were gathered together after they were spoken for thousands of years. They were sharpened and gleaned, and then at some point over time they were put together into a beautiful library of wisdom. Those Bibles do not contain all wisdom; they have no monopoly on it, but they do contain stories that have shaped and reshaped God's people in loving and gracious ways over millennia. We give Bibles to our second graders. We give them a library of myth and prose, of poetry and epistle; and we promise them that if they come to Scripture with a posture of curiosity, then they, then you, might discover some bit of the wisdom that is the pursuit of each of our souls.

We don't come here because we believe that any person knows something that we don't. We come here because we love exploring together. That's why we study. And 100 other reasons too. We pursue wisdom because we believe that that pursuit brings joy. “Anyone who lays hold of that tree will be called happy,” the writer of Proverbs tells us. I like to think as my grandfather made his way slowly across that stage, there was some bit of that applause that was not for the achievement of getting a degree being the eldest undergraduate, but more so an admiration for the pursuit of wisdom over a long period of time. It turns out if you've survived long enough, you have something to teach us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen