

Season after Pentecost
Old Testament Wisdom and Poetry: Proverbs

July 11/12, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 47-49; Proverbs 1: 1-7; 3: 1-8

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

What wisdom did you learn from elders? I've heard some of you speak of parents or grandparents who taught you the right time and way to plant vegetables or flowers. And others have spoken of those elders who taught them the basic of cooking or woodworking, or "the" right way to clean a window, cut a watermelon or sew a seam. We may have thought those lessons tedious or rigid at the time. But, darn, don't many of us do it just the way we were told because it really works?

Then there are those mottos or mantras we've heard repeated by the significant people in our lives. From my family: "If you don't have anything nice to say than don't say anything at all." "Don't force it!"... "Don't settle!"... and much later, "We weren't lost. We were on an adventure." Eventually you found yourself finishing the sentence before it got out of their mouth, while trying, not too successfully, to suppress a sigh or the roll of the eyes you felt. Most of them still get cued up and played in your head like an old cassette tape or CD. You don't know whether to grumble or laugh when, once again, the old adage proves to be true or helpful.

As long as there have been families and tribes, there has been the tradition of passing on wisdom from one generation to the next. There is wisdom that comes from experience. There is wisdom that comes from observation. In the earliest of times, it could mean the difference between life and death ---- the way to find water; what plants to gather for food and those to avoid; how to defend yourself from predators; how to hunt without getting hurt; the ways to safely prepare and preserve foods. That was knowledge that had to be passed on for survival.

When tribes and communities progressed into organized civilizations with political, economic and cultural dimensions, wisdom took on a more specific definition. There is

evidence of wisdom inscriptions and wisdom schools as far back as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The aim of this kind of wisdom was character formation. It contained practical advice to the young on how to attain a good and successful life. Some wisdom was more reflective, making observations about the unexplainable turns of human living and what then was the meaning of life. The field of wisdom was a blending of the practical and the philosophical with a very clear intention — to teach those within the community the right way to live for good social order and control.

The Israelites did not live in a vacuum in that ancient Middle Eastern world. Like other traditions of neighboring peoples, Israel developed its own adaptation of wisdom literature which had at its core their faith in the one God, Yahweh — Creator and Deliverer. In our Bibles, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are examples of Hebrew wisdom literature finally recorded about 4th century B.C. It is thought that this collection of “wisdom, quips and sayings may have been taught . . . as ways of shaping the generations to behave properly toward self, others, and God.” In these books you will find both “instruction, as well as observations about the way the world around them seemed to operate.” Though commonly attributed to Solomon, it’s clear that these writings were gathered over many centuries and from a variety of scholars.¹

Hebrew “Wisdom literature addressed issues of everyday life: economics, friends, family; work, sex, politics”² [and more] . . . “As Ellen Davis puts it, ‘The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch.’”³ This week we read the introduction to Proverbs that announces it is for learning, understanding, gaining instruction, teaching. It exhorts its readers to “do well by doing good; ... to have “the good life” by exhibiting the virtues of honesty, hard work, self-control,” “treating others with kindness and respect, showing honorable characteristics”⁴ . . . as well as the righteousness, justice and equity displayed by God . . . ”and above all, the fear of the LORD.”⁵

When you read the advice and observations in Proverbs you will quickly realize several things. First, “Proverbs oversimplifies the reality of humanity by placing people in one of two camps: wise or foolish.”⁶ We know people are much more complex than that and most of us are a blend of both. Proverbs also assumes that good, wise actions will bring good results and foolish actions will bring bad consequences, which we know is not always the case. We moderns might be tempted to dismiss Proverbs as naive and irrelevant except it IS in the Bible and when you read it you will make a second observation ---- there is a great deal of sound wisdom in it, too.

“To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble.” (20: 23)

“Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advise.” (Proverb 12: 15)

“Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” (16: 18)

“Better a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.” (15:17)

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (15:1)

“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, But those who are kind to the needy honor him.” (14:31)

And one of my personal favorites, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” (16:31)

While we may rightly challenge some of the assumptions of Proverbs, it calls us into a conversation about wisdom, God and faith. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is the theme verse for Proverbs. “As elsewhere in Scripture, “fear” does not mean trembling in horror but rather having awe, reverence and respect for the power and goodness of God. When we acknowledge in heart and mind that God is God and we are not . . . that God is Creator and we are created . . . there is the beginning of wisdom.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him
and he will make straight your paths.”

True wisdom is aligning one’s life with the will and ways of our all-powerful but extravagantly loving God. True and holy wisdom is enacted in the many choices we make each day. How do we learn what is God’s will and ways? They are revealed in Holy

Scripture, which we are to study together, and, most perfectly made known in Jesus who still comes to us, through the Holy Spirit, in Word and Sacrament.

Proverbs engages us in a debate about what wisdom we let rule our lives. We know all too well that worldly wisdom is not always godly wisdom and the world's definition of "the good life" has more to do with appearances, possessions and power. But we are to be different. We're held to a different standard of wisdom. Proverbs reminds us that wisdom is the unfolding understanding of God's intentions and ways. Proverbs says loud and clear, that the "good life" is when we apply God's wisdom to our living. Such wisdom is not magic nor are the results always what we or God would want in this sinful world of ours. Yet, among the things we learn from watching Jesus is that here is a divine and human synergy that happens when persons live in tune to God and God's purposes. The hungry are fed, a simple kindness will reverse a stinky day, the rejected find welcome, churches become vibrant centers of mission, broken people and communities find new life. When we let the wisdom and will of God pour into us (move hand from above to my chest), the power and love of God can flow in and then through us into the world (stretch arms out.) That's the cross we pick up to follow Jesus. That's the way of wisdom that "will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body" and a blessing to the world.

Linda M Alessandri 7/10/15

ENDNOTES

1. Quotes and much of the factual information in this paragraph was provided in the "Background" article published by Clergy Stuff (Bloomington MN, copyright 2015) for the Narrative Lectionary Summer 2015 session on Wisdom.

2. Kathryn Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Proverbs 1: 1-7; 3: 1-8 - Week 1" as posted on workingpreacher.org

3. Ellen F. Davis, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) p. 12. as quoted by Kathryn Schifferdecker.

4. from a different list of "right living" themes in the Clergy Stuff introduction mentioned above in endnote 1

5. Schifferdecker

6. Clergy Stuff "Background" article (see endnote 1)