

Season after Pentecost
Old Testament Wisdom and Poetry: Proverbs

July 18/19, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 8: 22-25; Proverbs 8: 1-11; 22-36

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

There are many tales, fables and even jokes about a seeker who goes looking for the meaning of life or answers to life's other big questions. These stories come out of many different times, settings and cultures of the world. In many of them, a person sets out on their quest, searching everywhere until they finally meet a renowned wise man or woman. Leo Tolstoy has one of these stories, entitled "The Three Questions" — retold for children by Jon J Muth. It goes something like this.

A young boy named Nikolai sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. "I want to be a good person," he told his friends. "But I don't always know the best way to do that. If only I could find the answer to my three questions," Nikolai continued, "then I would always know what to do." His three questions were, "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?"

His friends considered his first question — When is the best time to do things?" Sonya the heron said, "To know the best time to do things, one must plan in advance." Gogol, the monkey said, "You will know when to do things if you watch and pay close attention." Then Pushkin, the dog said, "You can't pay attention to everything yourself. You need a pack to keep watch and help you decide when to do things. For example, Gogol, a coconut is about to fall on your head."

Nikolai thought for a moment. He then asked his second question, "Who is the most important one?" "Those closest to heaven," said Sony, circling up into the sky. "Those who know how to heal the sick," said Gogol, stroking his bruised noggin. "Those who make the rules," growled Pushkin.

Nikolai thought some more. Then he asked his third question, "What is the right thing to do?" "Flying," said the heron. "Having fun all the time," laughed the monkey. "Fighting," barked Pushkin right away.

The boy thought for a long while. He loved his friends and knew they were trying their best to help him answer his questions. But their answers didn't seem quite right. An idea came to him. "I know! I will ask Leo, the turtle. He has lived a very long time. Surely he will know the answers I am looking for."

Nikolai hiked up into the mountains where the old turtle lived all alone. When Nikolai arrived, he found Leo digging a garden. The turtle was old, and digging was hard

for him. "I have three questions and I came to ask your help," Nikolai said. "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?"

Leo listened carefully, but he only smiled and went on with his digging.

"You must be tired," Nikolai said at last, "Let me help you." The turtle gave him his shovel and thanked him. And because it was easier for a young boy to dig than it was for an old turtle, Nikolai kept on digging until all the garden rows were finished.

Just as he finished, the wind blew wildly and rains burst from darkened clouds. As they moved toward the cottage, Nikolai suddenly heard a cry for help. Running down the path, he found a panda whose leg had been injured by a fallen tree. Carefully, Nikolai carried her into Leo's house and made a splint for her leg with a stick of bamboo.

The storm raged on, banging at the doors and windows. The panda woke up, "Where am I?" she said. "And where is my baby?"

The boy ran out of the cottage and down the path. The roar of the storm was deafening. Pushing against the howling wind and drenching rain, he ran farther into the forest. There he found the panda's child, cold and shivering on the ground. The little panda was wet and scared, but alive. Nikolai carried her inside and made her warm and dry. Then he laid her in her mother's arms. The wise Leo smiled when he saw what the boy had done.

The next morning the sun was warm, birds sang, and all was well with the world. The panda's leg was healing nicely, and she thanked Nikolai for saving her and her baby from the storm. Nikolai felt peace within himself. He had wonderful friends and he had saved the life of a panda and her child. But he also felt very disappointed. He still had not found the answers to his three questions. So he asked Leo one more time.

The old turtle looked at the boy. "But your questions have been answered!" he said. "They have?" asked the boy

"Yesterday, if you had not stayed to help me dig my garden, you wouldn't have heard the panda's cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spent digging the garden. The most important one at the moment was me, and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden."

"Later, when you found the injured panda, the important time was time you spend mending the panda's leg and saving her child. The most important ones were the panda

and her baby. The most important thing to do was to take care of them and make them safe.”

“Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing by your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in the world. That is why we are here.”¹

It might be easier for us if the wisdom of Proverbs and the rest of Scripture were written as clear and succinct as “The Three Questions.” Even the answers Jesus gave to questions left disciples then and now a bit baffled. We want definitive, black-and-white guidelines and answers that apply without exceptions. Or maybe, we’d like Proverbs, the Bible and our Lord to be more like one of those magic eight balls – You hold it in your hand, ask a yes-or-no question, turn it upside down and read answers like “Yes, definitely!” “Most likely,” “Reply hazy, try again,” or “Very doubtful.” (Which, by the way, would always allow you to try again if you didn’t like the answer.) But it just doesn’t work that way.

What we **do** find in the 8th chapter of Proverbs is that the wisdom God wants to share with us is not confined to the lofty mountain hideaways of hermits but in plain views, at the crossroads, along the way, at the town entrance ---- accessible to all who seek it. What Proverbs **does** tell us is that God’s wisdom will point us to what is noble, truthful, right and good. And, Proverbs **does** tell us that wisdom, like the human it’s personified to be, is a dynamic, ongoing, growing creation.

Accessible, right-ordering and responsive to change. That is why you find Proverbs telling us that the wise know how to keep quiet but then again it also says, “Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips they are deemed intelligent.” (17:28) So are you being wise or a tricky fool when you watch your tongue? “It depends,” Proverbs answers. We groan. Proverbs observes, “The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends.” (14:20) The very next verse reads, “Those who despise their neighbors are sinners but happy are those who are kind to the poor.” (14:21) If you stopped at the first verse you might think wisdom is commending the wealthy for their friends. But keep the two verses together you discover the first verse is an observation with corrective instruction in the second. God’s wisdom will not be reduced to a magic 8 ball (Lift up a Bible, shake it, turn it over and listen in the silence for an answer.)

The wisdom of God in the book of Proverbs, like all of Scripture, needs to be interpreted and applied. But it's not a free-for-all in which everyone's interpretation is equally valid. God's word and wisdom need a community to interpret it, so we stay on God's pathway rather than put our own desires and words into God's mouth. When we need to make decisions as individuals or a church, the wise seek others to help them discern God's will in this particular circumstances, at this particular time. We may not have a wise, old turtle Sage to help us make wise choices each day, but what we have, what we need to use is the filter of our faith, a faith that continues to be nurtured and changing as we open ourselves to God in the Word, Meal and church community. For in that dynamic faith is the basic wisdom of God we need: good choices will take us toward the Lord, not away; faith wisdom will lead us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and love our neighbor as ourselves; an active, seeking faith will remind us that what is good, what God asks is that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. That faith wisdom may not be as easy to apply as magic 8 ball but it's what we have and what we need to live in the fullness, the riches and light of our most gracious, almighty Lord. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 7/18/15

ENDNOTE

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1. Jon J. Muth, The Three Questions: Based on a story by Leo Tolstoy (NY: Scholastic Press, 2002)