

Message for August 9, 2020

Proverbs 1:1-7

As the story goes, a long time ago three friends were traveling across the desert when they had the bad luck to be captured by a band of robbers. They were relieved of all of their possessions and told that they would be executed by a firing squad. During the night before their execution the three men discussed their predicament and how they might escape. "I've heard" said the first man, "that these people are terrified of natural disasters. That might save us; let me go first".

Early the next morning as he was led out to be shot his two friends looked on from the window of their prison cell. He was placed against the wall and the firing squad got ready. Then, just as the robber chief prepared to give the order to fire, the condemned man looked over their heads and then shouted, "A sandstorm!" In the ensuing confusion he managed to escape.

Early the next morning the second man was led out while his friend sadly watched from the window. Remembering what had happened the day before, he too shouted right before the order to fire was given. Looking to the right, he bellowed, "A flood!" In the ensuing confusion he too managed to escape.

The next morning it was the third man's turn. He remembered how his two friends had managed to escape and so he carefully made his plans. He was brought before the firing squad and then, right before the order to shoot was given, he looked to the left and then shouted as loud as he could, "Fire!"

So goes an old tale; the last man was not what we would say particularly smart or wise. According to the Bible though, we, the people of God are to be a wise people but what is wisdom and where is it to be found? Perhaps it is best to start with what wisdom is not.

Contrary to what people sometimes think, wisdom and being smart are not the same thing. All the intelligence and all the education in the world does not necessarily make a person wise. As a person once said, tongue in cheek: “It is smart to know that a tomato is a fruit but it is wise not to put it in a fruit salad!” All the intelligence and education in the world does not confer wisdom so what is it and where is it to be found?

According to today’s scripture passage which has traditionally been attributed to King Solomon, a man whose wisdom was legendary: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Fear, or as it may more properly be translated, respect, is the starting point for gaining wisdom. In other words wisdom begins, not with intelligence or education but rather with an attitude, an attitude towards God and ultimately life itself.

Some time ago I read a book in which the author insisted that when it comes to our day to day lives, we are confronted by a very basic choice; we can primarily live for ourselves or we can try and live for God and others. Now the great temptation of course is to live first and foremost for ourselves and this is certainly what the conventional wisdom of the world teaches us. Over and over again we are told that our true joy, peace and happiness are to be found in doing what we want, as we want and when we want. In connection with this we often think that our true joy, peace and happiness are to be found in having this or that and this is certainly the promise of so many of the commercials we see and listen to; if we will only buy this product then our lives will be complete and we will be happy! This is the conventional wisdom of the world but this simply isn’t true.

Suppose for example that we won the latest multi-million dollar lottery jackpot. Of course we would be absolutely thrilled and life would be so much easier if money were no object. And yet, would having all the money and possessions in the world truly make us happy or content? The wisdom of the world says ‘yes’ but that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible insists that our happiness, joy, peace and contentment are to be found elsewhere; more specifically they are to be found in having the right relationship with both God and the people around us. Jesus knew this

which is why, when he was asked what religion and by implication what life itself is all about, he responded with the words of what we call “The Great Commandment.”

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Truly wisdom as the Bible understands it, teaches us that our relationship with God and others is the most valuable and important in life; indeed this has been brought home by what we have experienced during the past five months.

When I look back to the first two and a half months of this year, I am struck by how oblivious most of us were as to what was coming. To be sure we knew about the emergence of a new virus in China and then we saw what was happening in Europe but... That was over there and far away from us. Then in the space of a few days our world was turned inside out and upside down. Indeed the last time we gathered for worship I was aware that it might be a while before we would be able to do so again but even so... If anyone had told me that March morning that we would still be closed five months later? I would have never believed it! And even now in Stage Three as things become more ‘normal’, they really aren’t and this is true in the church as well.

At the present time the Session is working on the process of reopening the church. We are not quite sure of what things will be like when we reopen but we do know that things will be different. And of course what goes for the church goes for everything else as well; businesses, schools, recreational centres and so on. Truly as I have said more than once, few of us really appreciated how good normal life was before the pandemic struck. One thing that the present upheaval has done however is challenge us to think about life, our values and priorities and what is most important to us.

Wisdom teaches us that it is our relationship with both God and others that is the true source of our joy, peace, happiness and

contentment. Indeed it is our relationships that help give our lives value, purpose and meaning. This is one of the great lessons of the present time but the crucial thing is that we do not just agree with this in theory but that we also try and live this in our daily lives. Anyone can say that we treasure our relationships but it is what we actually do that matters. That is the point of this old joke.

Once upon a time there was a man who lived next door to a psychology professor. The man had a young boy: he wasn't a bad kid but he did get into mischief. Sometimes when he did, his father would give him a gentle swat on the behind. The professor, who strongly disapproved of any corporal punishment no matter how gentle, would lean over the fence and say, "Remember, you must love the child, not punish him".

Well, one Saturday the professor decided to replace his walkway. He dug up the old one, levelled the ground, poured in the concrete and then smoothed it over. It was a hot sticky day and he spent hours working on it. At long last though he was finished and went inside, congratulating himself on a job well done. As he stood at his kitchen window enjoying a cold glass of water, he looked out and what did he see? His neighbour's son, quite happily walking right up the middle of his new walkway! Trembling with anger he ran outside and picked up the child. As he did so, the boy's father leaned over the fence and said "Now remember; you must love the child and not punish him", to which the professor replied, "I do love him but I love him in the abstract, not in the concrete!"

This of course is the challenge of life: to be wise, to value and treasure our relationships, not just in theory but in practice, this day and every day.