

Living with Wisdom

Proverbs 3:13-20 & 4:1-9

Mark 8:34-38

I never preached on the book of Proverbs. Some people like the book. When I ask around people which book of the Bible they want to study, Proverbs always comes number one. Then, I usually say, 'OK let's think about it' but I never taught Proverbs at Bible Study groups. I had a stereotype or prejudice against this book because of some notorious sayings in the book, such as "Those who withhold the rod hate their children, but the one who loves them applies discipline." I believe it hurt the church and families, not strengthened them. Based on this verse Christian psychologist James Dobson encouraged parents to discipline their children with a rod or a stick. Do you remember how famous and influential his books about parenting were from 1970s to 90s? No one should hit children or anyone with anything. And there are some neutral wise sayings, such as "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." It sounds OK but I didn't know why we needed it in the Bible. And there was another reason why I didn't like this book. In some places it says, "Trouble pursues the sinners but the righteous are rewarded with good things" or "The righteous eat to their hearts' content but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry." I don't like this reward and punishment theology. When I grew up my mom was righteous. She was a good, kind, faithful Christian, not a wicked person at all. But she struggled with lots of troubles of life and her children's and her own stomach went hungry though she was not wicked at all. These proverbs didn't make sense at all to me. I believe the person in pain and troubles is not punished because of his or her sins but becomes a wise theologian because of those troubles that they endured. And there is another reason why I don't like this book. I am a narrative person. I need to hear the whole story from what happened, in what contexts, how it happened, by whom and why. In a story I need to see the beginning, conflicts, climax, and the conclusion. My brain seeks for narratives. That's why I didn't feel connected with some perky proverbs in a short sentence. But this summer I read it with more mature eyes and understanding mind and I am learning new things about this book. Now I understand more why many Christians like this book and feel connected with it.

I think the book of proverbs is like a lighthouse. In foggy and stormy nights, the flickering light from the lighthouse is a saving grace. In those nights even the most experienced sailors don't depend on their knowledge of mechanics of sailing. They depend on the flickering light and fix their eyes on it. Though I love to read books, when I am in an accident, I don't read my car's manual book. I turn on the emergency light and wait for the help comes. And we know that our life is full of troubles, difficulties, hard issues, accidents, and pains. We need the light everyday not just here and there when we have emergencies. The book of Proverbs provides that light and the book calls it wisdom. There are four books in the bible that we call wisdom literature. They are Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Among these four books Job and Proverbs have the word, wisdom, the most often. Job has it 25 times and Proverbs has it 51 times. Job has the word, "wise" 11 times and Proverbs has it 60 times. Definitely, Proverbs is the book about wisdom.

Then, what is wisdom. The chapter one verse 7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline." Eugene Peterson's Message Bible translates it to "Start with God – the first step in learning is bowing down to God; only fools thumb their noses at such and learning." A Jewish study Bible says, the word "beginning" is the most important to understand wisdom. Eugene

Peterson translates the word “beginning” to “Start with God.” Wisdom knows that everything is starting with God. When you hear the word “beginning” what do you think? We think Genesis chapter 1 verse 1. ‘In the beginning when God created...’ Also, gospel of John chapter 1 verse 1 says, “In the beginning was the Word...” The wisdom that we need to fix our eyes on is the “beginning.” The “beginning” tells us where we are from, to whom we belong, where we are going and what is the end. The word “beginning” has our collective memories of God who created, saved, and loved the world. Also, the word “beginning” holds our hope and faith in the future that there is the end or completion in God of glory, and we are not in perpetual limbo in confusion and pain. When we see our current life in the light of that wisdom, we know all is good and all is well.

Interesting thing is the book of Proverbs calls wisdom she, not he or it. The book assigns female characters and values to wisdom. I want you to listen to what wisdom is in this book: “Happy are those who find wisdom, her profit is better than silver, her value exceeds pearls, in her right hand is a long life, her ways are pleasant, she is a tree of life to those who embrace her.” Wisdom is true happiness, precious values, peaceful long life, she is pleasant, and she is a tree of life. Here is my favorite one: “Those who hold her tight are happy.” I want you to imagine a picture in your mind that there is wisdom as a tree or a woman and the happy faces of people who hold her tight? In that image we see that wisdom is nothing to do with power, rich, hierarchy, authority, success, or fame. When we seek for wisdom, we don’t gain those things that most people seek for. That’s why Proverbs says wisdom is the pleasant way and all her paths are peaceful. Eugene Peterson says, “Wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves in daily life.” Wisdom is a way of life, not accumulating information or achieving advance degrees. How do we find wisdom, the way of life?

The gospel of John says Jesus is the way, the life, and the truth. He is the incarnation of wisdom teaching us and showing us the way of life, death, and eternal life. In today’s gospel reading Jesus says, “All who want to save their lives will lose them, but all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.” Wisdom is losing our lives to gain them. One of my pastor friends was diagnosed with stage two lung cancer about two years ago. He had a surgery and received both chemo and radiation therapy. In the middle of treatment, he was diagnosed thyroid cancer and had another surgery and more treatment. He sent an email to his clergy friends about his struggle with cancer. He said he suffered with not only pain from surgery and treatments, but also worries and anxieties about what if it comes back. One day he decided to lose his life, the life of worries and anxiety, to the grace of God. He told himself that if he dies, he will die but as long as he lives today and each day, he will praise God’s grace and beauty. When he decided to lose his life, he gained it. When I read his email, I felt like seeing a picture that he is holding a tree tight, a tree of life, which is wisdom. wisdom is the pleasant way, and all her paths are peaceful. Thanks be to God.