

EMCC Aug. 4, 2019 – “The Third Way to Wisdom”

As a church we’re spending a month in the wisdom books from the Old Testament. I confess that the scripture today from Proverbs 3, and its advice, challenges me. When I was younger, I’d often skip over this book entirely in Bible study. I found a lot of Proverbs to be dogmatic. At St. John’s Anglican church in Vancouver, Canada, where I was confirmed, Proverbs and other wisdom books were used to reinforce the status quo, both in society and the church. Proverbs reminded me of one of my overbearing teachers, Mrs. Van Kerkhoff, who’d point a yardstick at us and warn, “Follow the rules, or there will be consequences!” I didn’t find much wisdom in her or this book.

This scripture is hard for me to read and harder to preach because it was used by the church of my youth to admonish people, to say that each of us deserves our fates. In many churches it’s still used as a divine proclamation from a God that measures us and finds we come up short. If we are good and pious enough, upstanding members of the church, then - and only then - God will bless us with riches, power and favor. If we are poor, struggling with health or faith, then we must deserve our suffering because of our failings and weaknesses. To me, this is not a message of hope or redemption but an indictment, a sentence to endure. If we are weary, discouraged, marginalized or feeling that the God of

love and mercy is far away, where can we find good news here? Perhaps by listening with different ears to this hard-earned wisdom, we can find the good news and lessons for living faithfully.

Growing up in the 50's and 60's as the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 boys, I got a lot of admonition. I never liked my parents' commandments, their insistence on faithfulness to rules: We were admonished, and more, when we didn't follow them. My parents possessed wisdom that rules make society civilized and just. I didn't appreciate the true wealth of their wisdom until I had children of my own, then my parents became much, much wiser. I remember calling my dad when my kids were teenagers and saying "I am soooooo sorry..." Anyone else have this same experience? My parents' and grandparents' commandments, or rules for living were simple: (1) Honesty, even if that meant acknowledging we had fallen short of our promises; (2) Integrity to do the right thing even when it cost us; and (3) Respect for all persons and creation. My grandfather Russell's wisdom was simple "Leave the world a better place than you found it." Some of his wisdom didn't fit, though. He was a cattle rancher who said, "Never invest in anything that eats or needs paint because it's a sure way to lose money." The wisdom I did learn from them helped me raise my own children. As I pass the parenting baton this fall

onto the next generation, I hope my children have absorbed enough wisdom to raise their own in the ways of justice, kindness and love.

I've also gained a lot of wisdom from my elders in my work as a chaplain and community minister. Those who've lived long, faithful lives have taught me about true wealth. As they near the finish line of life no one talks about money, accomplishments, positions, status, the size of their homes or who they knew. They talk about what has been most important to them throughout their lives – who they loved and who loved them. They reflect on their faith and the spiritual rollercoaster it has led them on. They describe how they've tried to leave the world a better place than they found it. From my elders I've learned the hard-earned wisdom that our relationships with each other, our creator and ourselves are the only accomplishment that matter. I've also learned to share abundance, time and talents with those who in need. That no love is ever lost - each thought, word and act of love reverberates across time and space. Time is the most precious commodity we have, and we should be careful about how we use it. Forgiveness is the best gift of all, both for ourselves and for those who share our lives.

Last week, Oby wondered what wisdom you'd want to pass on to the next generations. This seemed a wonderful inspiration, so I've placed index cards in

the pews. If you feel moved, write down one or more lessons you've learned, the hard-earned wisdom and the true wealth you'd want to pass on. If you want, sign your name to your card and place it in the basket as you leave worship today. Each of you has wisdom that the next generation will need, even if they don't know it yet. With Oby's leadership, we'll find a way to share our collective wisdom.

From both painful experience and observation I've learned in my life that there are 3 ways to acquire wisdom:

(1) from our own mistakes – the most painful and frequent learning mode;

(2) from observing other's mistakes – less frequent and less painful; or

(3) by paying close attention to the divine wisdom that God has gifted to us

and passed down over the generations through scripture and wise people. Over 62 years, I've learned that this third way is the least painful, but still my least frequent learning mode. Our scripture for today is this third kind, an admonition from our Old Testament spiritual ancestors imploring us to learn hard-earned wisdom the third way. Unfortunately, I still make the same mistakes a number of times before wisdom even appears dimly to me. I struggle to gain wisdom about how to live peacefully, justly, loving myself and my neighbor.

The feminine pronoun, she, her, in our scripture was used to personify wisdom in ancient Hebrew, Egyptian and Greek cultures. The Greeks named her Sophia. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the writers of Proverbs already knew what we've rediscovered in modern times: women are often the wisdom generators. The feminine, mindful of other's mistakes, understands that in order for peace and justice to rule the land, then everyone matters and has to be accounted for. "Do not be wise in your own eyes" is a feminine point of view that acknowledges that one individual or even group point of view is not the only perspective to consider before acting. The wise persons I know listen to others, not trusting they know everything. They aren't so self-assured that their way is the right way. Wisdom comes from deliberation and dialogue, qualities that seem more feminine than masculine. Wisdom yields to the guidance of the Divine. The ultimate act of faithful service to God's wisdom was Jesus yielding in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will but thy will O Lord."

How can we get closer to feminine divine wisdom so that we may be happy and enjoy her blessings of true wealth? How might we walk her paths of peace through our valleys of shadow? Rest in the shade of her tree of life? "My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments."

A commandment I want to lift up this morning, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me...” says to me that God is #1 and we’re not. It’s easy to think we’re #1. Sports teams and their fans believe they are. Many Americans believe that, as a nation, we’re #1, which means that everyone else is less important, beneath us. Many rich and powerful people believe and act as if they’re #1. When we see ourselves as first, it’s easy for us to believe our agenda is of paramount importance, our position is naturally the right one and everyone else should follow our lead. However, when we follow God and live according to divine wisdom, then we have to accept that we are second, yielding to a higher power.

“Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.” When we fail to heed God’s commandments, when faithfulness forsakes us, when we no longer look up to a higher power, we place our own plans, wants and agenda as #1. We can choose to learn wisdom the first and second ways, the hard ways, from repeated mistakes. This tends to make us lose sight of who we are, whose we are, and the inescapable fact that we are all here as children of God, God who has gifted us divine wisdom through the third way. God is always waiting for us, hoping we pause, listen and reflect, yielding and learning from hard-earned wisdom. God’s

wisdom brings more justice, peace and love into our hearts, homes and around this beautiful world we call home.

Each of us is loved by God who never leaves us alone. God admonishes us to care for and about each other, and this Earth, a gift from God. God wants us to choose justice, love kindness and walk humbly alongside. There are no shortcuts to true wealth, happiness, peace. We need to follow the commandments and listen for divine wisdom to write on the tablet of our heart, then read it each day.

God gave us 10 commandments but one plea. Accept the divine wisdom that trying to be faithful brings heaven a little closer to earth. We are loved, forgiven and provided wisdom here and now. We must pass along this love forgiveness and wisdom in our thoughts, words and deeds. Amen and amen.