



“Wisdom’s Strength”

Text: Proverbs 24:3-6

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

As we have been making our way through the collection of the Proverbs, there has been a rather obvious line of reasoning. If one is walking in the way of wisdom, one is staying close to God and the way God intends for us. If one is walking outside the way of wisdom, one is caught up in an alternative value system and way of life. Walk in wisdom’s way, and we are pursuing the way of truth, justice, love, and compassion. Walk outside the way of wisdom, and we find ourselves pursuing power, additional wealth, violence, and self-centeredness.

This week, we have something of a respite from the heaviness of the past weeks and we focus our attention on three far more gentle verses:

By wisdom a house is built,
and by understanding it is established;
by knowledge the rooms are filled
with all precious and pleasant riches.

Wise warriors are mightier than strong ones,
and those who have knowledge than those who have strength;
for by wise guidance you can wage your war,
and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

This is something of Proverbs meets “The Power of Positive Thinking.” The words are not outright condemnatory but have a softer, more instructive tone. But, what do they mean?

Let's begin with the word "house." Let's expand the translation of "house" - which we think of as a physical structure - to "home," or better yet, "family." "By wisdom a family is built, and by understanding is a family established."

If "wisdom" is an adherence to the way of God and the way God intended things to be, then building a home, or a family, is - of necessity - connected to God and the way of God. God created us with a need for community - for living in connection with others. Perhaps we are rediscovering that truth during these days of pandemic, when we are trying to maintain distance. When we cannot readily see and be with those we love and care about, we begin to feel the absence of community. These kinds of connections are critical to being fully human.

Still, though these connections are essential to our health and happiness, we tend to treat them rather cavalierly. We just assume that those relationships will be there - come what may. We take them for granted.

And then little things start becoming big things. A poorly chosen word becomes a firestorm. Escalation is the order of the day, until words are spoken that can never be retracted or erased from memory. Anger replaces compassion and hatred takes root where love once held sway.

Sometimes the needs of the one outweigh the needs of all. In our attempt to give our children the best possible childhood, we run them all over creation to do this thing, or be on that team, or take those lessons, or spend time with tutors. We teach our children the value of busy-ness: that those who are busy are more important than those who are not. We create an environment of stress and anxiety - both of which are being treated by mental health professionals working with children at a rate that would make you drop your jaw.

And when we do have time together as a family, we are rarely present with each other. We have a host of distractions available - readily available - and we turn to them without thinking. We take to the screens, we sequester ourselves off from the other, we work at this or that.

Community requires care. Family requires care. It is so easily and effortlessly lost. Community requires intentionality, not accidental moments of everyone having nothing to do. Family requires forethought and planning, not carelessness and haphazardness.

When we build our households and families on the foundation of wisdom, we ingrain into them wisdom's way: love, fairness, compassion, understanding, and presence. The bonds of love grow and are strengthened. Time becomes one of the great gifts we offer each other freely. Memories are formed that last a lifetime. These are the "precious and pleasant riches" the proverb proclaims. Filling a family - a household - a home - with anything less is ultimately destructive.

Central to that foundation is the knowledge and experience of God. As God and the way of God becomes a vital part of our family structure, we help each other understand what life with God is all about. It used to be said that the family is the first community of faith - and it is still true. When God is experienced as present, discipleship becomes a far easier proposition.

If we happen to be parents, this is part of what we promise when presenting a child for baptism. Back in the dinosaur days when I was baptized, the phrase was “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” My parents promised that I would be raised knowing who God is, what God expects of us, and - by implication - that I would be a part of the community of faith - the church.

I will tell you that journey was not an easy one. I enjoyed reading Bible stories. I liked going to church. I loved singing in the choir. As I grew - and especially in my college years - I ran away from it all. The demands of my more evangelical upbringing seemed ridiculous. God’s love seems conditional to me, despite what the preachers and teachers were claiming. I learned to be afraid of God - and lived a significant part of my life in fear.

But, God wasn’t ready to let me slip away. Through a series of events that I will not detail at this moment, I found myself employed by a church as a youth director. It felt right. And then, I knew I had to go to seminary. That was a shock. When I got to seminary, I discovered a whole new way of thinking about God and what God offers us. I learned that God was not against us - not something I needed to be afraid of - not angry and vindictive. And when I knelt for the prayer of ordination 34 years ago, and felt the weight of all those hands putting on my shoulders their own hopes and dreams for the church and for me, I knew I had come home.

My parents and the home they created laid the foundation for everything that followed. With the perspective of age, I see that clearly. They put my feet on the path, though I didn’t end up where they probably thought I would.

And that is the point I want to make with you. As parents and grandparents, spouses and partners, aunts and uncles, we help put each other’s feet on the path. We embody what the life of discipleship is. We put a face on wisdom’s way. We are companions and encouragers on the way of wisdom - the way of God. We share our insights and what we learned from our many mistakes.

And in the community of faith - which is the church - we share all of that and more. With the benefit of many generations, understandings, and perspectives, we walk with each other, enduring the trials, avoiding the pitfalls, rejoicing in the triumphs, and comforting one another in the sorrows. “Precious and pleasant riches” indeed.

This is wisdom's strength. The strength of mind and spirit that comes from living in relationship with God and one another is amazing. The strength to experience life in all of its fullness and wonder comes from living in connection with God and each other. Whatever else life may hold pales in comparison. Wealth, treasures, power, prestige - all are tinny and tiny compared to life lived in the God-inspired, God-given connections we were created to enjoy.

Discover that strength for yourself, won't you? Discover the joy of life lived in relationship with God and one another.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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