

## *Winning at School*

5<sup>th</sup> Weekend after the Epiphany – February 4/5, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

*Proverbs 1:1-7 (NRSV)*

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

<sup>2</sup>For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,

<sup>3</sup>for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;

<sup>4</sup>to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—

<sup>5</sup>let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,

<sup>6</sup>to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

*Christians are never out of school. We are disciples,  
life-long learners. But what is it we seek to learn?*

*Learning what?*

The book of Proverbs strives to teach us about the way of the wise, contrasting it to the way of the foolish. What is the way of the wise? It is the way of God. It is not about learning street-smarts or the ways of the world. It is about learning God's way, true wisdom, for all other ways are the paths taken by fools.

Read again Proverbs 1:7. This "fear-of-the-LORD" is not about being terrified of God. It is the English translation of a two-word Hebrew phrase that refers to genuine awe-filled reverence for God. This is where true wisdom and the knowledge that really matters begins. God is our teacher, showing us how to be all that our loving God hopes we will be.

*Learning always*

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. Psalm 119, the longest of all the Psalms, is an extended meditation on the joy of God's law. We usually think of God's Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, "instruction" is a better way to think of God's law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn't be surprised when the Psalmist says, "I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles" (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT).

The book of Proverbs contains, in essence, the lived experience of the Jewish community. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children how to live as the people of God. What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do? Given their heritage of devotion to God's word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

"Is the God of the Old Testament also the God of the New Testament?"

*This is a question I often get in one form or another, particularly after we've read the story of the plagues in Egypt.*

The answer is yes; the question is understandable. In the 2nd century, a Christian named Marcion read the Old Testament and saw in it a God of wrath and blood. In Marcion's view, the God he saw depicted in the OT bore little resemblance to the Jesus that he found in the New Testament. He came to see them as two different gods and Marcion urged Christians to get rid of the Old Testament entirely.

Wisely, the Christian community rejected Marcion's ideas. The story of Jesus makes no sense without the Hebrew Scriptures (the OT). Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah, of Israel, and hence the world's, hopes. In the book of Acts, nearly all the speeches in the first half of the book are proclamations of Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture and, indeed, the entire story of God's people. Jesus was the one to whom all of Judaism had been pointing.

But what about the differences in the Testaments? By Allen Coppedge's counting, there are eight portraits of God in the Bible. God as shepherd, priest, creator, redeemer, and so on. None of these portraits are complete in and of themselves. All are needed to even begin comprehending the fullness of God. Though all these portraits of God can be found in the Old and New Testaments, it is true that the emphases vary as the story progresses.

God's revealing of himself develops as the story of God and his people unfolds. We might call it "developing revelation." It isn't that God changes as we move forward. God has loved all people from the beginning and loves us still. It is we who have changed, though perhaps less so than we sometimes think. Let's make this more concrete.

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The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation” (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, “If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by “continue?” It might be translated “stay in” or “dwell.” Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus’ word means focusing on the good news of God’s kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus’ teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God’s word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.<sup>1</sup> Our *Thru the Bible* reading project is all about dwelling in God’s word.

#### A “disciple”

In the New Testament, the word “disciple” appears more than 250 times, usually when referring to Jesus’ followers, and translates the Greek word *mathetes*. It is a word based on the idea of learning, of being a pupil, apprentice, or student. Indeed, apprentice is probably the best synonym for disciple, in that an apprentice seeks to be like the master and we are called to be Christlike. In the New Testament, discipleship begins with a call from Jesus to follow him. This was not typical in the Judaism of Jesus’ day, for the burden was on the student to find a teacher. Furthermore, disciples of Jesus were called by him to be committed to him. For example, Peter had probably heard about Jesus before being confronted by him (Matthew 4:18-22), but it is the impact of Jesus himself that makes Peter into a disciple. Similarly, we are confronted by the reality of the living Jesus and are called to be his disciples, to be his students, and to begin a life-long process of learning.

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When Lamech is wounded in Genesis 4:23, his vengeance is taken by killing the man! If Cain is to be avenged seven times, he says, then Lamech will be avenged seventy-seven times. If you imagine the world of Conan the Barbarian you won't be far wrong. It is a world of unlimited vengeance. Thus, when God instructs Moses that his people are to limit their vengeance to some sort of equivalence, "an eye for an eye," it is moral progress (Exodus 21:23-25). Later, in Proverbs 20:22, more moral progress is made. We are not to exact vengeance at all. We are to leave the vengeance to God. By the time we get to Jesus, vengeance is off the table entirely. Now we are to forgive without limit (Matthew 5:38-48).

I don't know how much progress we've made in actually forgiving, but I do know that we have moved to ever and ever higher standards, with Jesus showing us the way to the highest standard of all.

To summarize, the Bible tells the story of God and his people. God's dealings with us have changed because we have changed. The harshness of an eye for any eye, helps us to see the grace that is unlimited forgiveness. It is not God who changes, it is we who have changed and our understanding of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

#### Winning at school

There are many ways to teach and many ways to learn. Some are verbal, others are non-verbal. Sometimes we learn by example, other times we learn through practice and repetition. Jesus taught his disciples using sermons (Matthew 5-7), stories and parables, answering questions with questions, and by his actions. All this is needed to make disciples for Christ. We learn from role models in our church, we learn in a Sunday School class, we learn from our own experience and reflection, we learn in Bible studies, and we learn when we volunteer for Vacation Bible School.

But we are talking here about more than learning the “church stuff.” If, as Christians claim, God is creator and sustainer of all that exists, then all learning must begin with God. Since the Enlightenment, many have tried to confine history, science, and faith to different rooms in the house – science in the attic, faith in the basement, and history in the east wing. Certainly, these fields of learning are not one and the same, but to pretend they are completely disconnected is foolish. To claim that Jesus is a matter of faith but not of history (or vice versa) is a false claim. To claim that creation is a matter of science and not faith (or vice versa) is a false claim. Though the three may occupy different rooms in the house, the ductwork all leads to the same place – to God. The deeper and more meaningful the questions of science, history, and faith become, the more we are led to questions about God.<sup>2</sup> We may live in 2006 . . . but the writer of the proverbs still gets it right. Wisdom and knowledge begin with God.

<sup>1</sup>from Dallas Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God*. 1998. San Francisco: HarperCollins

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps we will have the chance to explore this further in future background studies. It is a timely topic!

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

February 5 ~ 11

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Exodus 28-31; Proverbs 5</b> The priests of Israel and the sanctuary</p>	<p><b>Day 2 Exodus 32-34; Proverbs 6</b> The people abandon God and worship a golden calf. Moses intercedes for the people. God gives Moses two new stone tablets.</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> A day for reflection</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Exodus 35-37; Proverbs 7</b> Making the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant</p>
<p><b>Day 5 Exodus 38-40; Proverbs 8</b> All the preparations are completed and the glory of God fills the tabernacle.</p>	<p><b>Day 6 Acts 1-3; Proverbs 9</b> Jesus' ascension and the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost</p>
<p><b>Day 7 – Acts 4-6; Proverbs 10:1-16</b> A look at the first Christian community. Persecution of Jesus' followers becomes more intense. The apostles enlist the aid of others to help care for the community.</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?**

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

**Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

### **February Book Recommendation**

#### ***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Stuart and Fee**

Reading Scripture well is an art. This is an excellent lay person's introduction to interpreting the Bible. The Bible includes a variety of different literary forms – hymns, letters, histories, poems, gospels, etc – and each presents unique challenges. The authors examine each type of literature and provide some very helpful practical tips on making better sense of the Bible.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Christians and Christian denominations have started countless schools, colleges, and universities – for explicitly Christian reasons. What might those reasons, theological reasons, be? Why have most Christians always been so committed to education and learning? Do you see a lessening of commitment to learning in parts of the Christian community? Mark Noll's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, has been very influential since its publication in the mid-90's. Just based on the title, what do you think he might be talking about?

Methodists have always been committed to living a faith that embraces our heads, our hearts, and our hands. Our learning must reach our whole person, just as must our love for God and our neighbor. What sorts of learning have been most helpful to you in your Christian growth? Which have been least helpful? What could St. Andrew be doing to help all our members grow in their discipleship, in their apprenticeship to Jesus?