

## Humility to Learn God's Living Wisdom 9-15-24

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

I have spent my lifetime teaching people to ride horses. The progressive nature of the learning process is something with which I am very familiar. You teachers understand it too; the way knowledge builds on itself. When students first learn to trot on a horse, it's really bouncy, and the first few times, it feels very fast. Typically, I have students hold the saddle horn or a grab strap while they were getting used to the feel of the movement. But hands are required to communicate with the horse things like where to go and how fast, so it's really important for riders to learn to let go of the saddle. But it is scary to let go!

Most things are that way. We learn incrementally. And to learn the most, we have to keep moving from what feels comfortable and familiar into what feels awkward and scary. And each time, after a bit, what once was so uncomfortable becomes second nature.

For some reason, we take this for granted for children and for adults learning something new like a sport. But most of us don't expect to live this way in normal life. We have a universal sense that at some point we have arrived, we have gained the bulk of the knowledge we need, the wisdom and skill, and unless we purpose to learn some new thing, we should otherwise be fairly comfortable in our ability to maneuver through life. We largely expect to remain unbothered by the disorientation and challenge of development.

Lady wisdom, however, does not approve of this posture. She's frustrated with those who love being, what she names as, "simple." She goes on to say that "complacency" will destroy the foolish. According to ancient wisdom literature, one of the most significant

things required to gain wisdom, is to remain a listener and a learner. The last line of this morning's admonition from Proverbs says that our security comes from listening, not once having listened, but continuing to listen in an ongoing way, to the voice leading the way out of simplicity and complacency over and over again.

That sure sounds nice. But it's not the way we typically think. Most of like to learn a thing so we know it. So we're done and can use the knowledge and move on. We are creatures of habit and thrive off the ability to do things by rote, without having to think or make decisions. Learning is hard, its tiring, and its humbling. Most people don't gain skills and knowledge without a lot of failure along the way. And let's be honest, we prefer to know things, to be right, to have the answers, to avoid vulnerability in front of others.

Which is the interesting, complexity of being a Christian. We prize knowledge. And that is great, as long as we remember that knowledge is not fixed. My students would be brilliant at managing the trot. They did everything I told them, and they mastered the art of trotting, while holding on to the saddle. Then they'd let go and it would look like they were almost starting over from scratch. It didn't mean they were failures. It meant they were students; brave enough to keep learning. Intellectual knowledge, knowledge for living, and wisdom for understanding is not different. It continues to unfold, if we allow it. But humans don't typically appreciate the humility required for ongoing learning when it means what we have to allow our knowledge to evolve and change. Imagine the greatest minds in history, people like Socrates, Galileo, or Einstein... they weren't all loved at the time, because they were upending what previous generation understood as fixed.

This is where the problem of pride comes in. When we listen to the Psalmist, he asks God to keep him from presumptuous sin. From pride. This Psalm is all about the beauty of God's commands and laws, how they enlighten, and teach. Presumptuous sin is sneaky

and it can be difficult to pin down. But, when we're dealing with God's commands, we have to be careful to handle them with humility.

Those of you who are parents can understand an example of this, especially if you have more than one child. You may tell your older child that he can borrow your pocketknife, you teach him to handle it carefully and learn to use it. Well his 4 year old sister is not mature or enough dexterous enough, to handle sharp knives yet. If she were to be found with the knife and justify herself by repeating the instruction you gave your son, it would be a problem. Humanity's history with God is similar. God gave many instructions to many different people and groups of people throughout history. We do not still follow all of them. Many of them would be absurd thousands of years later in a completely different context. We recognize that things change and the needs of individual people as well as groups change over time. Unfortunately, that doesn't always keep us from thinking that we, as Christians, understand the best way to live and all the perfect theology crystalized into a fixed form for all time.

Which is why James tells us to beware of being a teacher! Not the best news for me. I hope you are all praying for me! The problem with our tongues, the things we say and teach, is that they betray our heart. When we start thinking we have the answers, we understand God, we know the right way and it is the only way, and that confidence shifts into pride and that pride makes us look down at others who understand things differently....then our tongues start saying things that give us away. And we learn that our hearts aren't as invested in loving others as they are in making others behave and think the way we do.

It's tricky. Wisdom can seem so straightforward. And it often is. But, just as soon as our knowledge turns to concrete, gets fixed, complacent, and proud, our wisdom melts away. Peter gives us a perfect example of this. Peter's instinct appears born of love. He

recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and wanted to protect him. His affection and protective instinct were both loving and wise. At least wise in the traditional sense. The problem was that it was not wise in the spiritual sense. And Jesus rebuked him for it.

Being a Christian is tricky. We are told to be wise; we are told to read the Bible and follow the commands of God. All of that is true. But if we think of the commands of God as something we can learn by reading the Bible, memorize, and follow perfectly based on our human understanding, we too risk missing Jesus. Peter was a Jew who'd heard his whole life about the coming Messiah. So when Jesus, the Son of God himself, the ultimate teacher, said things that didn't line up with what Peter thought he knew, he had the prideful audacity to try to correct him. That's what pride does. It makes us foolish. It makes us think what we know, from what we have already learned, is more trustworthy than what God is trying to teach us today.

To be wise, we have to listen to the voice of God speaking to us here, now, in every new moment. We have to be willing to be retaught things we think we already perfectly understand. We have to let go of the saddle and find our balance in a new way. We must trust the living God to interpret himself to our hearts in our current situation.

Jesus' message defied human wisdom. It even challenged the wisdom that thousands of years of God followers thought they knew. Willingly laying down one's life, accepting state sanctioned oppression and murder. Choosing to lose life, trusting that is the only way to find it. None of that is something parents teach their babies. But it is what Jesus taught his disciples. And it makes me wonder if we are willing to listen, to be humble and teachable enough to allow ourselves to follow Jesus into what he is speaking today? God's Wisdom is alive. Hearing it and following it starts with the posture of the heart.