

A friend of mine who lives in rural Virginia posted the following information on Facebook this week. In anticipation of flooding and power outages in the wake of Hurricane Florence, she had amassed, “Six 5 gallon buckets of water for flushing toilets, 8 gallons of drinking water, three flashlights, 2 spare packs of batteries, 3 1/2 tanks of propane, 1 camping stove, and a whole bunch of junk food and some actually not so bad for you canned food.” What she was really worried about was how to keep her toddler occupied for 2 days if the power did go out. My first reaction was this was a bit much for one who does not live along the coast. But she elaborated that the rain is already causing roads to flood in her area. And as they live in a very rural location, they will not be on the priority repair list if the power does go out. Was she being wise or foolish?

In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina lives a woman who has 7 dogs. She rescued all of them including one that survived hurricane Matthew. She says her car has too many miles on it to make it out of the area and she has limited financial resources so staying at hotels with the dogs is out of the question. So she boarded up her house determined to ride out the storm. Even though Florence has been downgraded to a tropical depression weather forecasters are still projecting rainfall in excess of 40 inches along with the 13 foot storm surge that hit the coastline of both North and South Carolina. Would you consider her actions to be based on wisdom or folly?

I guess the test of the wisdom of each will not be known until after the storm has passed and folks are able to assess the impact Florence has had on their communities. And when I think about the actions of both I can't help but wonder how many of us are truly prepared for a catastrophic earthquake? Are we wise or foolish?

Wisdom. The Book of Proverbs is all about wisdom, wisdom of the elders that was once orally passed on to their children. Professor Raymond Van Leeuwen, states that first nine chapters of Proverbs provides “instructions for life, as one steps into adulthood. The book offers a moral map of the world and a portrait of the universe as made by God. Within this order, with wisdom one finds the conditions that make life possible and an arena within which we humans find freedom.”¹

Wisdom in Proverbs, as in most of the wisdom literature found in the Bible, is not necessarily something accumulated as we experience life. Biblical wisdom is focused on our relationship with God and how that relationship influences how we live. So in the opening of the book we are told “Fear of the Lord is the

¹ New Interpreters Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol. V, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1997), 31

beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”² Fear of the Lord is equated with knowledge and wisdom and proper piety.³

Now most of us, when we hear that word fear, start to tremble a bit, we get a bit wobbly in the knees. When we think of fear we think we should be entering into flight or fight mode. Fear leaves us with a sense of foreboding, condemnation and judgment. But the reality is fear of the Lord is about reverence and obedience. In Deuteronomy we are told that fear of the Lord means one walks in God’s ways. To walk in God’s ways we love God with our total being and keep God’s commands and decrees for our own wellbeing.⁴ We follow God’s ways because to do so results in a good life, a life where all are cared for and where God’s creation is cared for as well. The words in Deuteronomy are echoed by the Prophet Micah in what has become known as the Great Requirement of the faith. Micah calls us to follow God’s ways by “doing or seeking justice, by extending loving kindness and by walking humbly with God.”⁵

Following God’s ways are so important, so life giving, that Wisdom cries out in the streets, from the town center, for all to hear. Wisdom speaks to those who have listened but have lost their way. Wisdom speaks to those who have never heard Wisdom’s truth before. And Wisdom speaks to those who are striving to be consistent in their faith walk.

The question Wisdom asks is how long are we willing to be simple. That is, how long are we going to love simplicity and scoff at God’s knowledge? Now in Proverbs the term simple does not mean that one is mentally challenged. And simplicity does not mean that one is working on being a minimalist. Both terms refer to one who would rather not follow God’s ways. To not follow God’s ways is to take up a life of foolishness as one is deemed to be without a moral compass.

As the opening of the book is addressed to those moving into adulthood, we need to bear in mind that youth are inclined to make mistakes, their world experience is limited. The key is to learn from our elders as well as from our own mistakes. Or as journalist and writer Sam Levenson said, “Learn from other peoples mistakes. Life is too short to make them all yourself.”⁶

Learning from our mistakes is about caring enough to change as we seek to strengthen our relationship with God. It is keeping our ears and our minds open

² Proverbs 1:7

³ The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, “Excursus: Fear of the Lord,” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 897.

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:12-13

⁵ Micah 6:8

⁶ AZ Quotes, “Sam Levenson,” accessed online 13 September 2018 @ <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1416979>

to hear and absorb Wisdom's teachings. Those labeled as foolish or naïve are those that turn a deaf ear to Wisdom. Those who close their hearts, minds and ears to Wisdom's teachings are focused on the ways of the world and so they turn away from God. As Paul so aptly said when we move from childhood to adulthood we move from being a noisy gong into a Christ centered loving relationship as we give up our childish ways, of speaking and reasoning and thinking.⁷

That does not mean we put aside our childlike love for God. It does mean we let go of our childhood tendencies to bully others because they are different from the rest of their classmates because of ethnicity, or their faith tradition, or the level of their mental or physical competencies, or their sexuality. Letting go of childhood and adolescent ways means we have learned to control our tempers, our passions, our desires and our wants. It means we take responsibility for our mistakes and are also learning how to move forward as we do make mistakes. Letting go of our simple ways means we have moved from being the center of our universe placing and honoring God as the center of the universe.

Wisdom has set a very high bar for the standard of our living. This standard of living impacts our personal lives, our work lives, our play, our community, our society and how we care for God's creation. It is about our religion – not as a denomination – but religion as a way of life. As a way of life our religion, our faith and worship of God, encompasses, permeates, every aspect of our lives.⁸ Our entire lives are dedicated to serving God.

This seems to be such a tall order, as most of us think the only way to make this happen in life is to join a religiously based community such as the Amish, or the Shakers, or a monastery or even a Hasidic Jewish community – where it seems that everything done is at least done in the name of God. I know that when I go on retreat to a Benedictine Monastery it seems so easy to stay focused on God as you enter into the rhythm of prayer five times a day and an evening of silent mediation.

But most of us do not live in such a world. We have jobs, family, health concerns, financial worries, losses, and other demands of everyday life. We may struggle to remember to say a prayer of thanksgiving before we eat. We may be frustrated by the callous attitude of a neighbor. Or want to scream because the dog next door barks all day and halfway through the night. We get caught up in

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13.

⁸ New Interpreters Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol. V, 33.

the heap of negatives that surround us so that we forget to invite God into our lives.

Just maybe we need a different way of doing things, a simpler way of approaching life so that we are not bogged down by life. Maybe we need to wholeheartedly embrace a few rules that will result in a shift in our thinking, and if taken to heart, will change our lives for the better.

A starting point is to remember to be grateful. Gratitude, giving thanks to God for everything we have moves us from focusing on us, from focusing on the negative or the things that we want to avenge, to the many gifts we have. With gratitude we focus on our abundance. In his book A Year of Living Biblically, A.J. Jacobs speaks of an awareness of the many things one can be grateful, thankful for, even down to the elevator opening when the call button is pushed. Bring grateful for the little things calls for a different way of thinking, a mindfulness for what is around us. When we are grateful for what we have been given, regardless of how small or insignificant it may be, walking humbly before God becomes part of who we are.

Another place to begin is to check in with the level of our sincerity. Do our words and actions and thoughts align? Do we say one thing and do just the opposite? That inconsistency between words and actions was one of Jesus' bones of contention with the Pharisees of his day. They put on the right show, but inside, their hearts did not match up. Jesus called them hypocrites as they refused to face the inconsistencies between the way they lived and the way they claimed they lived. They claimed to love God and were doing everything out of love for God. Yet they did not advocate for or care for those that were victimized or marginalized by society.

Consistency in words, actions and thoughts calls for us to look inward at our biases as well as embracing God's wisdom. For if we say we love God then we truly love our neighbor and work for the wellbeing of neighbor. If we say we love God then we also love and care for God's creation.

Embracing God's wisdom, we let go of our stiff necked, hardhearted and hardheaded ways because we are grateful for what God has given us and we love others as God has loved us. Embracing God's wisdom we joyfully join in the palmist's prayer, "may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer."⁹ Amen

⁹ Psalm 19:14