

Wisdom for Life

From a series on the Wisdom Literature

Text: Proverbs 8:35-36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord. But those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death."

I hope it is as much a relief to you as it is to me to be out of the Book of Job (laughter) and into something light—the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs is one of the Wisdom Books. I have seldom preached from the book. I have made various sorties into Proverbs. I would read a few verses here and there, but it seemed it was simply the gathering together of aphorisms and maxims and proverbs from ancient cultures that made a lot of sense, but over which I didn't really care to linger too long. There was no story there . . . I've just never been attracted to it.

However, on more serious study, I find that, in neglecting the Wisdom Books in general and Proverbs in specific, I have missed a very rich mine of spiritual direction and guidance. There is a lot of wisdom in this Wisdom book. I have learned that the Wisdom Books offer a strong affirmation of life. In the Wisdom Books we have not simply inconsequential truisms; we have the distillation of generations and centuries of observation of life as it really is.

What we have specifically in the Book of Proverbs is the invitation to follow the Way of Wisdom, thus finding true life, and admonition to avoid the path of foolishness, which leads to destruction and to death. *Lady* Wisdom as it were, (*Sophia*, the Hebrew word – somewhat akin to *logos*, the Greek word – that personification of wisdom and order and principle in the whole cosmic order). Lady Wisdom invites us to choose wisely, to live well, *in order* to find life.

As we can only scratch the surface of this book this morning, let me simply give you some of the fundamental assumptions of wisdom. It will not be exhaustive, but I think it will at least be enough to perhaps whet your appetite and give you a modest introduction to the contents of this literature, and specifically this particular book.

The first thing that I would reiterate again is that in wisdom literature there is an *affirmation* of life. The toast with a glass of wine in the Jewish society, "*L'Chaim*," "To life", is a hallmark of Jewish culture, of a Jewish perspective on

human existence. There is something wonderful in Jewish society—they celebrate life in a marvelous manner. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who has earlier written some books, last year published a book entitled *"To Life,"* which is a marvelous survey of Jewish faith and life and community, in which he points out that that is the hallmark of Jewish existence . . . "to life" . . . the affirmation of life, a strong positive regard for life, a valuing of life. It is definitely a central theme in the wisdom literature. Walter Brueggemann has written a book about the wisdom literature, which he has entitled *"In Man We Trust,"* that is a reflection of this basic premise, that life and the human person are created good.

The Book of Proverbs and all of wisdom literature was an attempt to gain knowledge in order to have mastery of life. To have mastery of life here and now means we should enter fully into it. We should wring the best out of it. We should live with joy and with delight, and we should exploit all the possibilities that are ours in a creation that God called into being and said, "It is very good." The Jew says enter all of it fully, enjoy it fully, delight in it before the face of God. Laced through the Book of Proverbs you will read that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – fear in the sense of reverence and awe, living before the face of God, *conscious* that one lives before the face of God, but lived with zest, for life is God's gift.

We need to hear that, particularly those of us who come as a part of the Christian tradition, both Catholic and Protestant, and particularly the western Latin tradition out of which we have flowed, that is, the Protestant Reformation tradition. In the Latin tradition, the central emphasis was not, as in Eastern Orthodoxy, on resurrection and celebration, but rather on the cross, crucifixion, sin and guilt. We have been nurtured in a rather dim view of the human experiment. We have been given, I believe, a negative perspective on the human person and on human experience. We are the inheritors of a few statements by Paul that have been systematized and absolutized by Augustine and by Luther and Calvin. We are the children of a doctrine of Original Sin. We believe in Total Depravity, and as the psychologist Maslow says, "The human person will generally live up to, or down to, the expectations that are held out for him or her." Our view of human life and the human person has been a rather negative view. We are suspicious of motives, of intentions, and rather negative on the human scene as a whole. And, that's too bad.

We've lost something that was intrinsic to the tradition of Israel, and that was a strong affirmation of life, of human life, of human existence. We could well go back and embody some of that positive feeling about life here and now that was their basic assumption, their affirmation of life.

I suppose somewhat of a corollary of that is, in the wisdom literature and in Israel's tradition, the human person was viewed as capable and responsible – capable and responsible of making decisions that would lead to life. It was part of the tradition, not only of the priests and the prophets with whom we are familiar, but also of the sages who reflected on life, who observed life carefully and patiently, and who rendered wise counsel as to the path that led to life, a tradition

that believed the human person was capable of deciding and responsible for those decisions. That doesn't mean that they were naive about human nature, as though the human person was entirely good, but neither would they agree with Augustine and Luther and Calvin that human nature was basically evil. They would rather say that the human person is made up of a little bit of both.

In fact I suspect that most of you would agree that we are . . . a little bit of both. We are a mixed bag. There are times when you feel pretty good about something that you did, and aren't there times when you despise yourself? Don't we know about acts every day that are heroic, and don't we know of instances every day in which the human person has been a scoundrel? Isn't there a constant interweaving of both in the experience of all of us? So, in the wisdom literature it was not naiveté that the human person was prone always to choose the right, but the invitation was there and the person was understood as being capable of making choices, and responsible for those choices, and reaping the consequences of those choices be they the right choices or the wrong choices. The invitation was there because the human person was viewed as capable and responsible for deciding. Therefore, there was a responsibility placed on the person. No cheap cop-out, "Well, I'm only human." You are human. Precisely the point. Therefore, stand up and decide, for you have a choice to make, so choose life . . . avoid the path of destruction . . . in the multitude of human decisions that you make every day.

Now listen carefully to me, because this is where the rub comes. According to the sages, the writers of the Wisdom literature, the choices are to be made on the basis of the authority of human experience. That means that you can't open up the book and find a text and find the answer to your dilemma. That means that morality or ethical choice cannot be laid on us from beyond ourselves, from another time. That means that there was a consistency between Proverbs and the Book of Job when God in the whirlwind said, "Don't bother me with that stuff. You can figure that out for yourselves. You've got minds. You've got experience. Decide and choose wisely. Order your lives." All the proverbs and maxims and aphorisms are the distillation of the wisdom that comes after years and years of reflection, centuries and generations of reflection, pursuing that ultimate. But there is no authoritarian rule to be laid on us from outside of us. We are called upon to the careful observation, the living of life as it is and the making of decisions accordingly in the midst of the concrete context of *our* everyday life.

"Well," you say, "What about the Ten Commandments, aren't those moral absolutes which can be laid on *us* eternally?" No! (Pause . . .) Nobody walked out yet? (Laughter) What are the Ten Commandments then? They are universal principles coming out of Israel that have been proven in the test of time. They are reflective of, for example, the Code of Hammurabi, that predated them. They are reflective of Mid-eastern culture and the peoples that surrounded them. They are the best wisdom possible for a fulfilled, successful human life, and the possibility of human community and society in that day, and *maybe* in ours. But those moral absolutes didn't drop out of heaven. There were no tablets that were penetrated by a divine finger. They were the best wisdom that could be distilled

out of the ongoing human drama by some of the best possible people who realized they were living with fear and trembling before the face of God. So it is with every decision that we have to make in the living of our lives. You can't go to a book. That's a cop-out. You can't ask a priest. That's a cop-out. You can't ask the Church. That's a cop-out. That's authoritarianism.

People like authoritarianism, really, even though in the eighteenth century we threw off all authoritarianisms. The human bud started to flower in the fifteenth century, in the Renaissance. Then the Reformation came along as an aspect of that, but that shut down the blossoming of the human spirit with one more authoritarian mode. Finally in the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason, Enlightenment, the human person said, "No" to the church, "No" to the Bible, "No" to the divine right of kings, "No" to every authority—the emancipation of the human person.

Well, pendulums swing too far. The enlightenment for all that it has given us has been found wanting in that to make human rationality the limit of reality is to truncate the Mystery of Life. So now we are in the Post-Modern Age as some would say. But what in a Post-Modern Age we must never do is to go back and put our necks under the yolk of some new authoritarian control.

Now, what does this mean for the decisions that face us as a society and as human persons? Well, it means that fundamentalism is a dead end street, whether it be Christian or Jewish or Islamic. In a hinge time in history, when the old ways have been shown to come up short and the new ways are not yet clear, people get very fearful, they get very insecure. In fact it's a good time for the Church, because people who are fearful come to church seeking answers, wanting a priest, wanting someone, some prophet to say it clearly. Make it simple. Make it burn. Answer these quandaries for me. Give me some ground to stand on. The Church is all too happy to beckon those who would come to find in it a crutch in order to avoid having to stand up and be an adult and make mature decisions in this world where it is so ambiguous and hard to decide.

But fundamentalism is not the answer. It is simply the reiteration of yesterday's answers to today's questions. You cannot go home. You cannot go back. When it seems that the tide of society is moving back, you can be assured that it is a reactionary movement that will explode in ever greater force one of these days. The Church ought not to be pandering to people's weaknesses. What we need to do is to call people, as the wisdom literature did, as the sages did, to be adult, to be mature, to look at the evidence, to live with observation and discernment, and to make decisions that lead to life.

Let me be concrete for just a moment. The Pope says, for example, regarding women in ministry, that he has no right to make a decision, that women cannot be ordained to priesthood because Jesus chose men. That, if the Holy Father will forgive me, is ridiculous. Jesus did not choose any women to be his disciples in that age, in that culture, for it would not have been tolerated. But it would not have been tolerated in that patriarchal age because women were devalued. Women were understood to be second class citizens, less capable, less gifted. Now

in the movement of culture, if we really believe that women are equal human beings, equally gifted, equally capable, then to perpetuate a decision out of the past that was based on an understanding of women that we no longer hold, to perpetuate that decision to the present when we understand something quite differently, that is fundamentalism. That is blindness. That is oppression. And, that cannot stand the light of day. You see, you can't have it both ways. To say, "I refuse to ordain women to ministry," but equally value them is a contradiction. They weren't ordained back then because they were not equally valued. Had they been equally valued they could have been a part of it. If they are equally able to serve, then they have every right to enter fully into Christian ministry.

Well, where else would you like to go? In the last two months in this congregation I have dealt with families in the critical care unit, about Living Wills. If you haven't gotten yours made out, I would suggest you do. We may think the cranky, kinky Kevorkian is out in left field somewhere, but I'll tell you he is dealing with a real life issue. To say that he is wrong, that human life is not at our disposal and that it is something for God to decide is simply to cop out. The moment you inoculate, the moment you are put on a respirator, the moment you give an antibiotic you are playing God, you have taken responsibility. You have entered into the life determining process. You have interrupted a natural course of nature, and you can't stop. You can't stop simply because it is a situation of fear and trembling. You are responsible, and God says, "For God's sake, stand up and be an adult and make a decision." We must be responsible. We must choose the ways that lead to life. We must discern. We must struggle. We must talk together. We must dialogue. It's not clear. It's not simple. It's not black and white. These are decisions that wrench us, but we are humans created in the image of God, called to think . . . and to decide.

We could move to the question of human sexuality. Two or three years ago the Presbyterians came out with a report finding that the Church ought to deal with this fundamental issue in our human existence, given what we know today about the human person. The report was defeated by the General Assembly by about 400 to 30, and I said in a sermon at that time that I would have been on the minority side. I think we lost a family that day. But I'll say it again. The Lutherans didn't do any better. They had a report this past year and it never even made it to the Synod there was such an uproar. People don't want to talk about human sexuality because it may tamper with the moral absolutes. That's ridiculous. The moral absolutes arose in a concrete context where people struggled together to find the way of life. To take yesterday's answers and absolutize them for today apart from the concrete situation in which we live is to abdicate our responsibility to be human beings to whom God gave minds and called us to think God's thoughts after God. The Episcopalian head bishop, Browning, said to the House of Bishops that, when they meet in September and present their paper on human sexuality, they should just pass it without debate, because there are just so many things that we don't know about and we are just going to disagree on, so let's not get into a debate. Let's just pass it!" (Laughter)

Abortion. People willing to kill in order to abort abortion. Convinced that they know God's mind and God's will on that very difficult issue. The wisdom literature would say that God is pro life, because God is pro choice.

God would expect us as responsible human beings to find our way in this maze in which there is no simple answer to any one of these issues that I've raised. For if I read the wisdom literature correctly, the one thing I may not do is try to find an answer in a book, or in an institution, or in an authority figure. You and I live before the face of God. We live in fear and trembling before the face of God, believing that there is an order, that there is that which is true and good and beautiful. But we'll never capture it absolutely . . . only tentatively, provisionally, partially. And on the basis of that, we are called to decide and to act.

I can't coddle you, friends. This is not a place where you can run for refuge from the tough decisions of the human story. If the Church could only be a place where people, rather than being coddled in their infancy, would be called to maturity . . . to seek wisdom . . . act wisely . . . find life.

God will not abandon us in the struggle, but neither will God write simple answers in the sky. It's tough. It takes courage. But in the end that's what it is to live as a human being before the face of God.