



Sermon, October 1, 2017
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path
“As a Flower Unfolds”

Scriptures:

<p>Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)</p> <p>3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.</p>	<p>Jeremiah 31:31-34 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)</p> <p>31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.</p>
---	--

Opening joke

An angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a

faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."

(Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon & Schuster)

Infinite Wisdom! Or just a tiny bit would be appreciated?

Wow! What a conundrum that college dean faced. As a scholar and academic, he prized knowledge and wisdom. As a college administrator, he also realized that with infinite wealth he could get things done. But just because he could have infinite wealth, what should he spend it on? He would need infinite wisdom to know how best to spend infinite wealth. And infinite beauty would only get him into trouble.

The search for wisdom is a golden cord that winds its way throughout the Bible. The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the books in the Bible dedicated to reflecting upon what Wisdom is. Our reading this morning from Ecclesiastes is a familiar one to many people, illustrating a maturity of experience that recognizes that life has its cycles, its times and places appropriate to certain activities and behaviors.

We are on a journey through a sermon series and a year-long process of visioning. I use the word journey intentionally. We are talking about Tending the Path that Jesus has given us, the Path, the Way he taught and lived, and which he tends with us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The main goal and destination of the spiritual journey is wisdom. What do I mean by "wisdom"? One way to understand wisdom is that it represents a way to integrate the various pieces of your life into a way of life that is unified and intentional. It means no longer being lost in our wanderings but being guided by our destination. It means arriving at home in our hearts.

Wisdom is acquired intentionally

Wisdom: How do you get it?

Answer: You don't get it. It's not found on some store shelf somewhere. You become it. You become it by yoking the experiences and knowledge

“As a Flower Unfolds”

you have gained in life with the One who can provide you a bigger perspective and view of life.

Matthew 11:29 - “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

When I was a student at PSR I lived in an apartment that was halfway up a hill that overlooked downtown Berkeley. I was able to see all the way across to the Golden Gate and out into the ocean. I would go up on the roof and see how the roads and highways and freeways fit together, and where all the bridges were. I gained a perspective on how everything fit together. That is the perspective that a Jesus-sized point of view can give us. Wisdom begins by yoking our experiences and knowledge with the bigger perspective that God can give us in Jesus Christ.

But just what exactly is Wisdom?

1. Wisdom entails the ability to reflect upon critical experiences, problems or difficulties one has experienced or encountered in one’s life, and
2. The ability to (self-)critically examine the factors, etiology and development of those experiences, problems or difficulties, and
3. The ability to derive modes of behavior and mental attitudes based upon this analysis that are conducive to the adaptive well-being of one personally, and
4. To extend those modes of adaptive well-being to others.

Wisdom is developmental in nature, but it also must be structured and guided. Just because one has a lot of life-experience does not mean one is wise. Process of growing into wisdom is related to practices of spirituality.

Jeremiah speaks of a time in which God’s laws will be written upon our hearts, and we will no longer plead ignorance to God’s way because we haven’t been taught that Way. The writer of the Book of Hebrews proclaims that this Second Covenant was made with us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who released the Power and

“As a Flower Unfolds”

Presence of God’s Spirit from being confined (or so people thought) in a temple made by human hands. Now God’s Spirit was said to reside within the human heart. But the problem still remains: we have to make contact with that Presence in order to be shaped by the Way of Wisdom residing there.

It is a process growth and development, of self-examination and confession, of asking for forgiveness and forgiving others, of stepping back from our narrow focus in order to look at the world from a God-sized perspective.

Unfurling and Expansion of Understanding and Perspective

The imagery of a flower unfolding is a good analogy for the unfolding of human consciousness at the personal as well as the societal level. As a flower buds, opens, wilts, and produces seeds, it goes through a process of development or progressive evolution in which each stage is continuous with the previous stage, and is necessary for the subsequent stages. Human societies and the history of human civilizations is like a whole garden of plants growing, budding, putting forwards flowers, etc. Not everything grows and develops at the same pace. And so, we have societies in which there are various segments of society that are at differing worldview developmental stages, just as every person goes through developmental stages differently, depending upon a wide variety of conditions and factors.

Stages and Growth

Many different people have researched how it is that people grow and develop in terms of their awareness of the world around them, and how to relate to that world and the people within it. I have found it helpful to read the results of research and the descriptions of life stages and social stages to understand some of the dynamics of how people behave, and what is going on in our society and culture throughout history. I view these as steps along the journey to wisdom. One such system is called Spiral Dynamics, which I will share with the leadership of the church in our first Visioning Workshop in November.

“As a Flower Unfolds”

Think of it as reading road sign along the Path of Life, or the Path of Human History. “You are this far to Wisdom.” Basically, the idea is that human individuals as well as whole societies develop and grow in the manner in which they think and relate to one another. We can evaluate where we are along the Path according to how we think and how we relate to one another. For instance:

1. The first stage in development is basic survival, and thinking is instinctual. Find food, keep warm, protect oneself and one’s family. The next level is magical or animistic thinking: there are spirits everywhere that have to be appeased or avoided, the ancestors may be these spirits, people are bound by clan and tribal ties.
2. After that, the next level elevates these spirits to a few power-gods, which patronize kingdoms. Powerful rulers emerge, that are viewed as quasi-divine. Power and glory are qualities that are cultivated, warriors are glorified who protect the empire from threats or extend that empire. In individuals this stage manifests as youthful rebellion, frontier mentalities, epic heroes, James Bond villains, gang leaders, and so on.
3. At the next level, the Mythic Order, Life has meaning, direction, and purpose, with outcomes determined by an all-powerful Other or Order. This righteous Order enforces a code of conduct based on absolutist and unvarying principles of "right" and "wrong." Violating the code or rules has severe, perhaps everlasting repercussions.
4. Out of this stage emerges the next stage of Scientific Achievement. The world is a rational and well-oiled machine with natural laws that can be learned, mastered, and manipulated for one's own purposes. Highly achievement oriented, especially (in America) toward materialistic gains. Our country and most of the industrialized world is heavily invested in this stage right now.
5. But the next stage is also starting to emerge, the Communitarian stage. The human spirit must be freed from greed, dogma, and divisiveness; feelings and caring supersede cold rationality; cherishing of the earth, and all life. Refresh spirituality, bring harmony, enrich human potential. Strongly egalitarian, anti-hierarchy, pluralistic values, social

“As a Flower Unfolds”

construction of reality, diversity, multiculturalism, relativistic value systems.

Summary

You don't need to recall all of this. I relate this simply to give us something to start thinking about. We are trying to make sense of our world and the vast cultural changes around us. We are on a journey, collectively as a global human civilization, and as a nation, and as a United Methodist denomination, and as a small-membership church. But this journey has a destination and goal of wisdom. It is a life lived in knowledge of the Presence of the One whose Way is written upon our hearts.

There was once a very famous explorer who was giving a talk. He was asked by an audience member for the secret to his successful explorations. He answered: “Know where you're going and how to get there!” He then paused and thought for a moment and added, “And choose carefully who you take with you.”

Wisdom is where we are going. The spiritual path Jesus laid out for us is the way to get there. And best of all, we have one another and Jesus Christ in our midst to accompany us. And, together, we will get there.