



Sermon, October 8, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path “Becoming Wise”

Scriptures:

Ephesians 4:1-16 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

4:1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ⁹ (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Psalms 119:10-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
¹² Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.

Trails and Journeys

For most of my life, I have lived along what was once the Oregon Trail. In some of those places, I could still go out and look upon the ruts left by the iron-rimmed wooden wheels that bore the Conestoga wagons and the

“Becoming Wise”

furniture and supplies of families traveling to where we live now – the so-called “Eden at the end of the road.”

Some of my ancestors came to Oregon and Idaho along this trail. What takes us just a few hours to travel would have taken those ancestors over a month or several. The trip from St. Louis to Oregon took over a year, and those who traversed it faced death, privation, perilous river crossings, hunger, extreme physical stress, loss of family and loss of personal possessions. Many who survived the Trail started over completely. Everyone who traveled the Trail were marked and shaped by the Trail. A distinctive was of living and being emerged from this, that characterizes those of us who were raised in the Western United States.

Our journeys can shape and change us.

One of the characteristics of a journey is the fact that it has the power to shape and form us for the rest of our lives. That is one reason the growth of the spiritual life is depicted over and over again as a journey. 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. Last week I discussed what I mean by “wisdom.” I shared with you that wisdom represents a way to integrate the various pieces of your life into a way of life that is unified and intentional. You become wise by yoking the experiences and knowledge you have gained in life with the One who can provide you a bigger perspective and view of life.

In today’s reading from Ephesians, Paul talks about the path to an integrating of our diversity as human beings into a unified whole. He calls it “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” This is the Christian-sized, bigger perspective on life, and it is a bigger perspective on what it means to be a human

“Becoming Wise”

community. But that community has a goal: to grow and mature into the full stature of Christ, who is the head of that body, that community of people.

The events of the past election cycle, the events down in Las Vegas, events all across the world demonstrate that we desperately need to grow into maturity as a human species, or we will destroy ourselves and possibly our entire planet. The Path that Jesus bequeathed us provides a means for just that sort of growth and maturing.

Now, in speaking of journeys, we’ve all probably had the experience of either being a child in a car with our parents, or having children in the car with us, and there is the inevitable question that gets asked, “Are we there yet?” How do we know where we are on the journey? How will we know when we get there? One of the things I decided to do with Dawn-Hunter when she was younger was I taught her to read a map. As we drove along, I had her watch for signs that told about town names, geological features, rest areas, parks, and so on. She no longer asked, “Are we there yet?” She knew where we were on the journey.

I would like to share with you some road signs that describe the journey of growth in wisdom and human social maturity. 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.

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

“Becoming Wise”

relate to one another. If you want to follow along, I have listed them out in the Sermon Reflection Sheet inserted in your bulletin. So, the road signs:

1. “Just Getting By.” Our earliest stage in development as individuals and as humans is basic survival, and our thinking is instinctual. Find food, keep warm, protect oneself and one’s family.
2. “There’s Magic Everywhere.” 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.
3. “My God’s Bigger than Your God.” 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, autocratic political leaders, and so on.
4. At the next level, the sign reads “Entering the Mythic Order,” and here, 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.
5. “Explore, Explain, Extract.” 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, although a lot of our politics actually exhibits tendencies of the previous stage.

“Becoming Wise”

6. “We Are One.” 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 construction of reality, diversity, multiculturalism, relativistic value systems.

Summary

You don't need to recall all of this, but I do strongly encourage you to take the sermon reflection sheet home with you. 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.

“Are we there yet?” No, but being able to read the signs may help us understand where we are along our human journey. And maybe it will help us to appreciate the journey, and the sights and adventures along the way.