

## **Pursuit of Wisdom**

Faith & Wisdom: Part 5 “Pursuit of Wisdom”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – July 30, 2023

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**Readings:** Proverbs 4:1-9; James 3:13-18; Mark 12:28-34

**Reflection:** Psalm 25

**Greeting:** Call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding. Seek it like silver, like finding a hidden treasure. Then you will discover the knowledge of God. The Lord gives wisdom and protects the paths of justice.

**Prayer:** We call upon you Lord, knowing that you are more ready to bestow your blessings upon us than we are to seek them, and give out of your love and righteousness that which we have not earned. We turn to you, knowing that all wisdom begins with you. May you guide us to your knowledge and strengthen us in your truth. May we receive your mercy, eager that we may share your mercy and love with the world. By your Spirit, guide us and lead us this day that we may share in your word and walk in your ways, and may we be enlightened in word and deed through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 25

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord! Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Psalm 25:1-10 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 25 and we hear of learning God’s ways. We see that following God’s paths will lead us to where we need to be. That we are called to mercy and love in the Lord. How do you seek truth through Christ? How do you let the Holy Spirit guide you? How do you demonstrate the love God has shown you? What are the things that you hold fast to as the central points of your faith? How may we call others to live a life of truth and faithfulness? How can we share the wisdom and knowledge of faith that God has shared with you?

**Prayer:** Lord, it is your everlasting light that we seek in the darkness. May you bolster our faith so that we may seek your wisdom and truth. May your love strengthen us as we join together before you in prayer on this day. We thank you for your care, inviting us to seek your knowledge and to know your word. Together we bring our spoken and unspoken joys and concerns to lay before you, knowing that you are attentive to our every need. May you lift us up that we may know your blessings in our laughter and our tears. May your steadfast love guide us through our joys and our sorrows. And by your Spirit may you guide us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Proverbs chapter 4, verse 1 through 9.

*Hear, children, fatherly instruction; pay attention to gain understanding. I'll teach you well. Don't abandon my instruction. When I was a son to my father, tender and my mother's favorite, he taught me and said to me: "Let your heart hold on to my words: Keep my commands and live. Get wisdom; get understanding. Don't forget and don't turn away from my words. Don't abandon her, and she will guard you. Love her, and she will protect you. The beginning of wisdom: Get wisdom! Get understanding before anything else. Highly esteem her, and she will exalt you. She will honor you if you embrace her. She will place a graceful wreath on your head; she will give you a glorious crown." (Proverbs 4:1-9 CEB+)*

Our next reading comes from James chapter 3, verse 13 through 18.

*Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts. (James 3:13-18 CEB+)*

Our last reading comes from Mark chapter 12, verse 28 through 34.

*One of the legal experts heard their dispute and saw how well Jesus answered them. He came over and asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus replied, "The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these." The legal expert said to him, "Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him. And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one's strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings*

*and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, “You aren’t far from God’s kingdom.” After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.  
(Mark 12:28-34 CEB+)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week marks the end of our faith and wisdom series. And with it, we will look at the pursuit of wisdom. As part of that, I really wanted to look at the way that we put all that we have learned into practice. Because the way that we pray practice our faith is a demonstration of the wisdom we have gained. That includes the way that we use wisdom to understand the Bible, including having a way to consistently interpret the Bible. And that can be a huge help when we run into difficult passages. We start once again with Proverbs. That we hear of the importance of gaining wisdom and knowledge. That wisdom will protect us and lead us down the right path. That wisdom and understanding will help us to grow in faith. That it is imperative for us to gain wisdom and understanding so that we can be knowledgeable in how we live. We hear this echoed in James, where James asks if we are wise and have understanding. That we should have actions that reflect that wisdom. That we need to abandon jealousy and selfishness and that we must seek the truth. We hear once again about what comes from having wisdom and may be reminded of the fruits of the Spirit. That wisdom will make us gentle, peaceful, merciful, fair, and genuine. That our actions should show kindness and bring peace to others. That if we gain wisdom and understanding from above, it will be evident in our actions. And all of this comes to a head in our Gospel reading. It might sound familiar, as it corresponds to last week’s reading from Luke. In Mark, Jesus is asked what the most important commandment is. The response is that you should love God and love your neighbor as yourself. As we discussed last week, these are concepts that run through the whole of Scripture. I bring it up again this week because we can use these two commandments to interpret the entirety of the Bible. Doing this gives us a unified theology, because it gives us a way to look at our relationship with Christ and how we serve God.

I think it is an important thing for us to consider when we think about the pursuit of wisdom. Because the knowledge we gain helps us to interpret the Bible in a way that is consistent. It can keep us from appearing to be hypocritical as well, because it means that we can apply the same lens to everything we read. Because we should have an understanding of how we interpret the Bible and why we interpret the way that we do. One might try to argue that we don’t need to interpret Scripture because we should just read the plain meaning of the text. The problem is that the Bible is not a plain book. It takes wisdom to interpret and understand Scripture. Just reading the Bible in English is an act that requires interpretation, because someone had to pick the words that would best represent the original text. So, even selecting which Bible to read can require us to use wisdom so that we understand what choices were made in interpretation and translation. From there, we have to use wisdom in understanding the meaning of what we are reading. And there may be sections that you have trouble trying to relate to. There are passages that are poetic. There are sections that are

heavy with symbolism. We have parables in Scripture that take understanding. We have many different authors with many different styles. We must use our due diligence when we study the Bible so that we understand all of those things.

I use those two great commandments, about loving God and loving neighbor as a way to read the entire Bible. When I read, I am always asking the question “How does this help me love God and how does this help me love my neighbor?” I have found that when we apply these things to how we read, we can quickly begin to see what is most central to our faith and what isn’t. Now, someone might say that everything in the Bible is important. And to that I would agree, but some of what we read may not be as helpful to us as others. This can happen because of where we are in our life. It can happen because of how we relate to certain stories and lessons. But it also means that we might find that some parts are not inspiring us in the same way. When they begin talking about everything that the Ark of the Covenant was made of, I can struggle to see how that relates to my day-to-day life and how I treat others. And that is OK. Sometimes it is best to set a Scripture aside and return to it later. But I’ll be honest, I don’t know that the dimensions of the tent will ever really be central into how I live my life in Christ. I don’t know that it will inform how I live our loving God and neighbor. But I don’t think we should ever feel guilty about that either, because part of wisdom is figuring out how we live our faith. This isn’t to say that there are parts that don’t matter. It just means that there are parts we may not find to be at the heart of our faith. I can still learn from something that isn’t central to my faith, but it also means that how I interpret isn’t always going to be something that I feel we have to agree on.

One could say that is just picking and choosing the parts we want. But instead, I would say that it is understanding what holds meaning for us today. We see this happen in Scripture itself. The law tells us that we should stone an adulterer, but Christ says that the one without sin should be the first to cast a stone. The law tells us that we should take an eye for an eye and a life for a life, but Scripture also tells us that we should instead forgive. The Bible says that we should follow the law of circumcision while it also says that we are no longer bound by circumcision. This is why it requires wisdom. Because we have to understand how we will live our lives in Christ while figuring out the best way to love God and love our neighbor. But in the examples we just listed, the choices we find there result in having a greater love. We could execute people for violating the law, but a greater love is to forgive as we have been forgiven. We could require circumcision, but if we love the way Christ loves us then we should know that there is no physical change we can make that will make us more precious in God’s eyes. We apply the greater love and live by it. The law quickly becomes a stumbling block if we only use it to condemn others. Instead, we use it as a guide for how we can live while remembering that we are called to an even greater love. Because this is not a new struggle. We see it take place in the early church. They have to decide if the dietary laws need to be followed by everyone or not. And the point is made that they can be followed if one chooses, but that it isn’t necessary for all. That people can choose to live by them, but that it shouldn’t be forced on others. That

we see the Prophets challenging the very idea of sacrifice. Christ challenges us to go beyond the law to instead show even great love and mercy.

Christ sets for us the example of how great love can be, and we are called to follow that path. We run into problems when we think that we aren't interpreting the Bible and deciding what is central to our faith. But we must be honest about our faith if we are to live it honestly. When Jesus teaches us to reject condemnation, we are called to reflect on our own lives first. Not that we are to ignore sin, but that we should reflect on the mercy we have been shown so that we can show mercy through love. That we need to be willing to forgive just as we have sought forgiveness for ourselves. And this can help us with one of the more difficult parts of trying to love our neighbor. That is when we have to stand up to a neighbor in order to protect another. And this can be difficult, because we have to use wisdom and patience. We must approach these situations in love. Because we must remember that our God is a God of justice. One who desires peace and an end to all oppression. That our Savior stood up for the least and the last. We are called to that same care and concern. But this isn't always easy. Because hatred and bigotry can be sneaky. And we have to find a way to call them out with love. But because of love, we also have a duty to call them out in order to protect those who are harmed by them. Because bigotry doesn't have a place in God's kingdom, because you cannot express bigotry and still love your neighbor. Because it is a result of hate, not love. Sometimes, to love our neighbor means that we must stand up to a neighbor that is causing hurt. Because if we are called to protect the least and the last, sometimes it means protecting them from our neighbor. But we are called to do this with love. We can do this with a call to repent. That we wish to see others turn their lives around and embrace love. That forgiveness is open to all people. That one cannot support hate while claiming to love their neighbor. That we are called to let go if ignorance and fear to embrace wisdom and truth. But this can be difficult. Because it is often those who are abusing others who will cry the loudest that they are the victim. That we cannot call on them to change because that would be judging them. But that misses that point. We aren't calling on them for condemnation but offering salvation. Because we cannot sit idly by when someone else is being harmed. They are condemning themselves by giving in to hatred.

This is difficult because we must walk the difficult path of protecting those who are being hurt while offering those who do the hurting a chance to change. Because both actions are a result of loving our neighbor. But the greater responsibility comes from showing love to those who have been hurt. Those who are targeted for who they are or where they are from or what they look like. We must stand up for those who are villainized for simply wanting to be able to live in peace. We cannot say that we love Christ while hating our neighbor, and we cannot say that we love Christ while turning a blind eye to the suffering of our neighbor. Because every time I look to the Bible for guidance, I find that it will always lead me back to loving God and my neighbor. That every bit of it will show me how important that love is. That when I can understand Scripture through the idea of loving God and neighbor, that I have found a greater

love than I thought I could ever know. That every time we reject loving our neighbor, we reject loving God. And we see time and again that when we push away from loving God and neighbor, that we turn away from Christ. And because of that, I can interpret the whole of the Bible through that idea of loving God and neighbor. That I can always find a path forward in faith when I walk with Christ in love. That I can base my theology around those two commandments. So, I encourage you to look at how you live your faith. I encourage you to reflect on how you seek wisdom and understanding to bring truth and peace into your life. I hope you can think about how you show love to others. And I encourage you to think about what truly matters for your faith in Christ as we look at the Bible with the ever-present ideals of loving God and our neighbor. That together we may strive for God's kingdom here on earth. That we may strive for God's truth in all that we do. And that we can strive for God's love in our pursuit of wisdom. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Our Current Series – The Spirit Moves**

Our current series looks at how we exercise our faith with wisdom. Each week we will look at Proverbs and explore an aspect of our faith.

July 2nd – Free to Care – Proverbs 3:21-35; Philippians 2:1-11; Luke 6:27-36

July 9th – To Believe – Proverbs 9:7-12; James 2:8-17; Matthew 9:18-31

July 16th – Being in Prayer – Proverbs 15:26-33; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 18:1-8

July 23rd – God & Neighbor – Proverbs 12:17-26; Galatians 5:13-18, 22-26; Luke 10:25-37

July 30th – Pursuit of Wisdom – Proverbs 4:1-9; James 3:13-18; Mark 12:28-34

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert
Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown
Marsha Overton	Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox
Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuinness	Janet Yokum
Donna Farley	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser
Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts
Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton

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