

Making Wise the Simple

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It's September and school is back in. Despite our worries about covid-19, new variants, and unvaccinated children, we are still generally happy that our kids, and grandkids, and even great-grandkids are going back to school, aren't we? The teachers among us, including me, even if we are retired, still get a sense that the year is beginning and that we need to hurry up and get prepared. Probably most of us feel something of this—after all, each of us spent a goodly number of years in school. September was, and remains, a most significant time.

But start-up of school doesn't come without tension, does it? I want to push into that as I begin today. The etymology of the word “education” gives us the Latin *educere*, which means “to lead out.” Simply speaking, education prepares children to make their way in the world beyond the home; educators lead them out, away from their familiar securities, providing them skills, tools, and attitudes that aid them in handling unforeseen circumstances. Parents are left sobbing when their littles one climb onto that bus or walk through the school doors because they are, quite literally, being led away, into a new world beyond the confines of home, and often a world beyond what is familiar to the parents themselves. The parents have to invest a great deal of trust in the authority of the education system. Are those teachers wise guides for their kids as they begin their journey into the wider world, or are they Pied Pipers leading the innocents to their destruction? The history of our own Anabaptist-Mennonite denomination, the various schisms within it, and its relationship with the worldly authorities outside it, reveals the tension between the world out there and the home community—the *gemeinde*.

As a “grafted” Mennonite, I can remember experiencing that tension from the other side. When I was 12, a United Church preacher's kid, Ontario began to consolidate all small local rural schools into “central” schools. I left the one room school in our Bruce County hamlet of Belmore and started grade seven at the larger public school in the nearby town of Teeswater, near Wingham Ontario. My nervousness about being the newbie in class, a country mouse among townie cool cats, got a reprieve in the second week when the principal knocked at our classroom door and introduced a latecomer new kid. Simon came in holding his wide-brimmed hat in his hands, wearing a white shirt, denim overalls, and black

boots. Now remember, this was 1965, when daring girls were starting to wear Go-Go boots, and with-it boys were letting their hair creep over their ears in imitation of the Beatles. So, Simon was a bit of an outlier, even though his type of people were strangely familiar to me from seeing their buggies on the county concession roads. Well, after three weeks in class, Simon disappeared, and never returned. We never learned what happened. It's likely that after the government's closure of one room rural schools, the Plain Mennonite groups in Bruce County were scrambling to set up their own parochial schools and school boards to maintain their separate way yet appease the government, as they did in Waterloo County around this time. Who knows? Simon may have been a flashpoint for that change. He may also simply have turned 14, and quit school to work on the farm.

These September tensions we feel about education are an appropriate context for our readings today from Proverbs and James. The personification in Proverbs 1 of Lady Wisdom speaking at the city gates, raising her voice in the public squares, and crying out in the streets and at the busiest corners captures the value humans have placed on wisdom from ancient times. But the fact that she has to cry out to us to listen to her also suggests our ambivalence about the call of wisdom. Apparently, a lot of us don't listen to her. In her terms we are simpletons, scoffers, wayward, complacent fools who hate knowledge.

But James provides some justification for our ambivalence about wisdom, doesn't he? He says most of us shouldn't become teachers because those who teach "will be judged with greater strictness." Teachers have to make a profession of speaking, and James warns that, though small, the tongue is a dangerous member of the body. James's imagery gets graphic: "The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ... [it is] a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Well, after listening to that you might wonder why you listen to sermons week after week, and I might be wondering why I dare to come up to the pulpit.

Even James, who includes himself among the teachers, seems to quail at the difficulty of managing his tongue wisely. He says, "With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing." And then comes his most plaintive observation and direction to us: "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." But we do it, don't we? In spite of ourselves, we do it. As Paul says in Romans 7:15, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do,

but what I hate I do.” As James puts it, more gently, “all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.”

Even Lady Wisdom, apparently, makes the mistake of cursing those made in the likeness of God. Listen to her:

1:24 Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,

1:25 and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,

1:26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,

1:27 when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.

1:28 Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

In my sermon on August 8 I spoke about the parable of the Prodigal Son, about how God’s prodigious gift of grace and mercy, which always surrounds us, enables the contrite prodigal to be recovered. So I ask Lady Wisdom, where is your mercy for those who eventually turn and call out to you, who seek you diligently? Lady Wisdom, it seems to me, at this point reflects more of her all-too-human author than that author might have hoped. Wisdom becomes condescending, refuses to concern herself with contrite sinners, sees them as simple, stupid, and deserving of what befalls them, and won’t help them out of the mire. In chapter 3, verses 15-17, James comments on such a manifestation of wisdom: “¹⁵ Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. . . . ¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

In fact, though, Proverbs knows there is this dark side to Lady Wisdom. In chapter 9, verses 13-18, we see this other side as we meet Lady Folly, who, like Lady Wisdom,

sits at the door of her house,
 on a seat at the highest point of the city,
¹⁵ calling out to those who pass by,
 who go straight on their way,
¹⁶ “Let all who are simple come to my house!”

But if you answer her call and enter her house, you find you “are deep in the realm of the dead.”

Dr. David Beldman is an Associate Professor of Religion and Theology and Department Chair at Redeemer University in Ancaster. In his essay “The Portrait of a Lady (Wisdom): How to Find and Keep Up with a Complicated Woman” he says

By portraying Lady Folly as a kind of doppelganger of Lady Wisdom, Proverbs is communicating a profound truth ... : sometimes we may think that a certain idea or course of action or decision is wise when in reality it turns out to be folly. What’s more, this case of mistaken identity can have devastating and life-threatening consequences. Paradoxically, it takes wisdom’s discernment to know the difference between what is wise and what is foolish.

And that’s the challenge, isn’t it? We need to use wisdom to discern whether we are being wise or foolish. Sounds complicated. Mightn’t it be better to do as the Plain Mennonite folk do, and adhere to practical hands-on knowledge, avoiding the temptations and winding side trails of abstract thought? Perhaps. But I believe that our more open or, as the Plain would say, “English” way of being Mennonite enables us to engage with and be informed by abstract philosophical and theological thought wisely, through faith-in-action in the centre of life.

Throughout history there has always been a tension between philosophy—the love of wisdom, and phronesis—practical wisdom, with adherents of each holding the other in disdain. Yet in both traditions there is a recognition of the importance of Kairos time, which is not Chronos, or clock time, but is understood as the “right” or appropriate or opportune time for something to happen. That “right time” always happens within a set of circumstances, and so needs to attune itself to experience and tradition. But the “right time” also presents an opportunity to change those circumstances in previously unforeseen ways, and so can challenge both tradition and experience.

In Christianity we understand a Kairos moment as a gift of God, an opportunity which we should seize and act upon. The meeting of Philip and the Ethiopian is a perfect example of a Kairos moment. You’ll recall that an angel tells Philip to go to the Gaza Road through the desert. There he sees the Ethiopian sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah.

Acts 8: 29-31; 35

²⁹The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” ³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ³¹“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Philip baptizes the Ethiopian in some nearby water, and then the Spirit of the Lord whisks Philip away to another place. Interestingly there are two Kairos moments here: one where the Spirit of the Lord gives Philip an opportunity, and the second when Philip appears and gives the Ethiopian an opportunity. At the heart of the Kairos is a teaching and learning moment, driven by the Holy Spirit.

Closer to home I'd like to remind you of a Kairos moment that Dave Brubacher told us about two weeks ago, if not quite in those terms:

In the early days of our work [in Timmins, says Dave], the MCC staff had a huge plastic tote box out front with items like pots and pans available for free, as a sign indicated. Late one afternoon I was working inside the window, and I could tell a woman was pointing down asking if the items were free. By now the tote was largely empty and I expected she might take the last items. I nodded yes and carried on with my work. When I looked up a few moments later I saw the whole tote being carried across the street. It was not exactly what was intended by the MCC staff, but the sign did say, “free.”

I tell this story ... because it comes with an emotion that surprised me. Most of you know that I am, for the most part, a rule keeper. Knowing that the items in the tote were free, but not necessarily the tote itself, [meant to me that when the tote was taken away there] was a rule broken. Yet, I felt nothing but compassion for the woman. ... It is obvious to me that recovery is needed in our relationship as a settler people and our indigenous neighbours. What is not clear to me, is who might be the primary beneficiaries of recovery, the indigenous people, or people like me. May God's wisdom guide us!

This is a thoughtful and honest story, and also an instructive one. It shows how a Kairos moment can surprise us, open us up to the possibility of change in a set of circumstances we thought we knew, and so, inevitably to the possibility of a change in ourselves.

We have seen, in various ways throughout this sermon, that wisdom is not a guarantee of virtue. It can become prideful, condescending, and neglect those made in the likeness of God. We have seen that the tongue needs a firm bridle. But we have also seen that our diligent faith can open us to the Kairos opportunities presented by the Holy Spirit, gifts which can lead us out—educate us—into new ways of being the church, and the neighbour.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit, remember, as found in Isaiah’s prophecy of the Messiah, are wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Proverbs repeats a number of times the adage that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” But the fruit of the Spirit is different, isn’t it? In Galatians Paul says, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5: 22-23). So, the end or goal or fruit of a Spirit-filled wisdom is a dramatic impact on our interactions with others in the world.

I’ll conclude with the wonderful prayer by Sarah Bixler that was included in the Grace Weekly News on Sept. 2. Let us pray:

*Come among us, Holy Spirit,
and create a community of learning.*

*Help us grow
in wisdom and understanding,
in skill and strength,
in knowledge that honors you.*

*Teach us
to know you, ourselves, and our neighbors more fully,
to see your presence in the world more clearly,
to love more deeply – with heart, soul, mind, and strength.*

*Form us
as doers of justice and lovers of mercy
as we walk humbly with you and one another
on this path of learning.*

Amen.