

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Get Wisdom

Proverbs 4:5-8, 16:16-25, 19:8

Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.... How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. The highway of the upright avoids evil; those who guard their way preserve their lives. Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud. Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper, and happy are those who trust in the LORD. The wise of heart is called perceptive, and pleasant speech increases persuasiveness. Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it, but folly is the punishment of fools. The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips. Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death.... To get wisdom is to love oneself; to keep understanding is to prosper.

On only one occasion did our whole family – Barbara, our four children, and I – fly together. It was when Barbara and I were serving in our first churches out of seminary, living in a tiny west Texas town; and Barbara's parents' Christmas gift to us that year was tickets to come to Iowa to be with them for Christmas. So we did – because the thought of driving from west Texas to Iowa in the dead of winter with six people in a five person Subaru didn't seem at all enticing. But, nonetheless, we were worried. We had to connect at Stapleton, and we knew that at that time of year it would be a madhouse and that odds were that we'd be running from one end of the airport to the other, three small kids and a baby in tow. I also was very worried about getting bumped (now I look forward to those opportunities, but not with five children in tow!) So I had armed myself; I had done my research. I had photocopies of literally pages and pages of information gleaned from various airline timetables (this was pre-internet days) about alternate ways to get from Denver to Iowa and a listing of hotels near Stapleton arranged by price. I had all of this for both directions of our trip. I had so much sheer information, my pocket could hardly hold it

all.

Now, it turns out I didn't need any of that information. Both coming and going the connections worked – although Barbara and I do remember that they were both connections were rather tight and we were close to running through the airport, Barbara pushing the stroller with the baby and me hauling our carry-ons, telling the three older children “*Don't slow down or you'll have to live here.*” But we made it. All was well. And yet I have reflected since that long-ago trip more than once on the fact that sometimes it is possible to have too much information. Now, it was not a bad thing for me to have done that research. But there are indeed times when **too much** information is not helpful because instead of being a good thing, I later realized it increased my anxiety as I tried to juggle all this information and as the mere possession of it made me anxious about all the things that *could* go wrong! And yet ours is an information age, isn't it? Someone once said that just before the beginning of the Renaissance in the 1500s, it would have been possible for a well-educated person to pretty much be able, if he or she wanted, to know pretty much everything there was to know about the world. And whether true or not, the claim seems especially laughable now, when we are simply deluged and overwhelmed by the sheer amount of **information** that comes at all of us. The internet, and 900 cable channels, and Facebook, and Twitter, and on and on and on. We are deluged by information.

So let me cut to the chase: It is not **more information** that we, as Christians or as the church, need right now, in this day and age with its particular challenges and opportunities for life and ministry; no, we don't need more information, we need **more wisdom**. That's what the writer of the Book of Proverbs was getting at when he said, instead; “*Get wisdom, get insight.*” And did you hear how “wisdom” is described in the passages that Matt read? Words and phrases like “understanding,” “better than gold,” “wise of heart,” “persuasiveness,” “to [get] understanding is to prosper.” To seek wisdom is

to be godly. In fact – you may not be aware of this – but the word “Wisdom” appears over and over in the Book of Proverbs and, in fact, it is one of the images that is used to describe God. Now, this isn’t as familiar an image to us for God as, say, “Father,” or “Shepherd,” for example, but it’s nonetheless an image that I suggest we pay more attention to. Because the writer of Proverbs is not simply saying that God is wise; he’s saying that God is in fact Wisdom itself. And Wisdom – and it’s interesting, isn’t it, that Wisdom in the Hebrew is always a female image – is so important, so key, so a part of a faithful life that God is personified with that image – and we are told to aspire to and try to be like God in that respect. And, you know what? – I suspect that God is in the same position we are: the perfectly omni-present God knows all the **information** there is to know about the world, but thank goodness, God takes that information in and responds to it with wisdom and with grace and with forgiveness and with second chances and most of all with hope.

So what does all that mean for First Christian Church as we together share in ministry in this time and this place with its peculiar challenges and opportunities? What does it mean on a day on which we will hold a congregational meeting – after months and months of considering, discussing, and praying about the option of committing ourselves to use some of our resources for a three year plan to better respond to what God is calling us to do and to be in this place, and to better respond to our vision of being a people of radical hospitality, outrageous generosity, and joyful service? In the midst of that opportunity and challenge, in the midst of the challenges of ministry in our time and place, what does it mean to “get wisdom”?

Let me name three things that I think that means. First, I’ve quoted my very wise mother before on this topic but I’m going to do so again. She once said “Just remember

that for every complex question, there is an easy, simple, obvious answer – that is **wrong**.” We live in an era of complexity. I wish it were otherwise sometimes, don’t you? Times are changing, the culture is changing, longtime patterns of life that seemed that they would last forever are changing before our eyes. Church no longer is the central value in many people’s lives, and certainly not in the culture’s life. There was a day not that long ago when you couldn’t have imagined children’s athletic events scheduled on a Sunday. More and more people have less and less familiarity with the church and more and more people report that they consider themselves “spiritual,” but not “religious.” That’s the **information** that is all around us. But **wisdom** will require that we not simply lament what used to be and is no more but to instead figure out ways to respond with faithfulness even when we wish we didn’t have to! And yet the temptation that we shall be faced with – which Wisdom needs to avoid! – is to settle on too simple an answer to whatever challenge or opportunity is currently facing us.

Now, you may say, *“well, the churches that are growing seem to have settled on some very simple answers.”* Well, yes and no. Oftentimes, indeed, there are churches that we can point to who have indeed staked out some very simple “doctrinal” answers and positions that everyone is expected to adhere to. Those churches – at least initially, anyway – do tend to grow in numbers because there is a certain what I call “relief factor.” Sometimes you just get tired of complexity and do indeed want someone to tell you what to think, what to do, what to be. But the problem is that those sort of over-simple formulations tend not to **widen** the circle of God’s care and grace but to inevitably **exclude** certain folks. And those churches who start with those over-simple answers and who start out growing actually, research and experience shows time and time again, end up having as many folks leaving out of the back door as coming in the front door. Because in the face of family complexity, in the face of the reality of, say, divorce in even the most loving of families, in the face of women who feel called to leadership, in the face of complex issues concerning

sexuality and justice, churches that have over-simple answers to these things increasingly feel to many folks as oppressive and as not understanding the reality of life. Let me say it this way: Over-simple answers are not wisdom, because they simply don't take account of the messiness, complexity, and nuance of life – and of the fact that God is always seeking to widen the circle of Jesus' family rather than narrow it. That's the **wisdom** we should hang on to as we move into the future!

Second point: Wisdom also requires the complexity, messiness, and nuance of life not **immobilize** us because we get stuck seeking the perfect answer, the perfect way forward, the perfect structures for our work and ministry. Someone once said "perfection is the enemy of the good"¹ and that is indeed often true. At the beginning of his Presidency, Franklin Roosevelt, in response to a question about his plans for combating the Great Depression, said that he had no detailed plan, that his plan was to try this, try that, try something else, try *anything* in hopes that he would happen upon something that was good and helpful.² Wisdom requires that we not get stuck either, that we not get fixated on having the perfect answer to each question or challenge or opportunity that faces us. As I have suggested more than once, given the changes in life all around us, more and more people simply are not aware of the church and are not aware of how we have a loving, gracious, welcoming understanding of a loving, gracious, welcoming God. Which means, I believe, that part of the wisdom for our future is that we must continue -- to use a word that I know some don't like – "market" ourselves. The sentence that is on our church's website and that is printed on the "church member business cards" that I hope each one of you is

¹Attributed to Gustav Flaubert <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/32644.html> or http://www.spacetropic.com/2005/03/perfection-is-enemy_11.htm

²Cf., e.g., Philip Greenspan's comment that "FDR was an experimenter, willing to try anything. At times he implemented contradictory actions, insisting that they might work." <http://www.swans.com/library/art11/pgreen59.html>

carrying so you can share with those in need, says “A church where you won’t be judged, where you won’t be told what you ‘have to’ believe, where ALL are truly welcome.” In this era in which so many people are skeptical of church, have even felt themselves unfairly judged by the church, it is wisdom on our parts, I believe, to never ever be shy about saying who we are and the kind of God we proclaim. Because that is the wisdom that so many people need.

Finally, third, I think that to “Get Wisdom” requires that we heed what the writer of Proverbs said there in the middle of our verses for today; did you hear it? – *“pleasant speech increases persuasiveness.”* Now, the writer didn’t just mean “pleasant speech” as in *“have a nice day”* or *“How are you? Fine.”* Now I’m not against people being pleasant to one another as we all go about living and working alongside each other. When we lived in Hawaii, it used to be said that you need to remember that when you live on an island you really do need to try to be nice to people because you’re going to see them all the time! But the writer of Proverbs has more in mind than just that kind of pleasantness, that kind of niceness, and the God who is identified as Wisdom itself has more in mind than that too! For you see, in our sometimes difficult messy, complex era which is full of both opportunity and challenge for Christians and for the church, it is **imperative** that there we have a strong commitment to civility and what the old tradition called “Christian charity.” You and I may not always agree about everything; you and the person in the pew behind you or in front of you may not always agree about everything, but the God of Wisdom calls us to, in the writer’s words, a “pleasantness” of speech and action. That means as we think about how we need to do what we feel called to do that we listen carefully to everyone and we always assume the best about others until or unless shown otherwise. For do you remember the other use of the word “pleasant” that is so often quoted from the scriptures? It is from the Psalms: *“How pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] dwell together in*

unity” (Psalm 133:1). Why is it “pleasant”? Precisely, in part, because as the writer of Proverbs noted such unity indeed makes for ***persuasiveness***. One of the criticisms that is sometimes aimed at churches is that their witness can hardly be persuasive to the culture around them when they are themselves so dis-unified! There is some truth in that, isn’t there? So, I think that to “get Wisdom” requires that we as members and leaders of the congregation make a continued re-commitment to unity and moving forward, even when sometimes the particular way forward is not the way that you or I might have done it. So when, for example, you or I are in public, talking to others about our church family, do we focus on a frustration we had with someone at a committee meeting when things didn’t go our way (which is going to happen **wherever** two or three are gathered – no matter what the organization someone isn’t going to get their way)? **Or** do we talk about the overwhelming generosity of spirit in this place – which really is its miracle, after all, and its gift to this community – and it is what will speak to the folks that we need to reach, of doing the mission that God calls us to do. And that indeed will be to “Get Wisdom.”

“Get Wisdom.” It is the word that the writer of Proverbs offers this day to us. And it is a good word on a day when we consider how we can approach the coming few years of our ministry together. And it is the word, I think, that calls us to always be suspicious of over-simple answers, to have the courage and the faithfulness not to get stuck seeking “the perfect” answers, and to commit and re-commit ourselves again and again to “dwelling in unity” knowing that the plans God has for us, the hopes that God has for what we can do, are so big and so exciting and so needed in a hurting world that we should never let our quibbles with one another undercut those mission dreams.

“Get Wisdom.” May we heed those words, may we be excited anew about what we can do for the God who is Wisdom and Hope and Healing and calls us to be those things too. For that privilege: thanks be to God. Amen.