

**Reflections at the Service of Baccalaureate
Wachusett Regional High School, 2004
Text: Proverbs 3:13-20**

The poem that Kimberly read a few minutes ago—the one about “The True Wealth”—comes from the third chapter of the Book of Proverbs. It’s part of a larger body of literature common in the ancient near East—especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia. That context was somewhat similar to the sort of event that brings us together tonight: ancient near eastern wisdom literature existed in order pass on “instructions for life” to the next generation. In other words, some old guy (like me) gathers together the youth of the next generation (that’s all of you) to share what they have learned through their own life-experience—some of the lessons of life—with the goal of hopefully making it a bit easier for you to navigate your way in the world.

This reading comes from the Jewish Bible—or what Christians would call the Old Testament. Many of you will (like me) consider it a “sacred text.” But it doesn’t seem (at least not to me) to carry a lot of extra theological baggage with it. Regardless of whether one is a believer or not, it’s the sort of text that allows us to come to it on its own merits. Does it ring true to our experience of the world? I want to invite you to ponder that question with me at least for the next few minutes—to explore it at least as poetry—and to ask what if anything it suggests about how the world works...

There are of course limits to this kind of advice that one generation presumes to give to another, because times change. Sometimes the most important lessons one generation learns aren’t so easily applied to the context faced by the next generation. Always this kind of advice needs to be sifted through—tested in the midst of new circumstances, because life is complex and there are always several shades of gray between the black and whites. Hopefully what you’ve learned at Wachusett is more about how to think than about how to regurgitate information—because it is the former that is really needed to navigate your way in life, and the latter can become dated pretty quickly.

But there are nevertheless some basics; some things that seem to hold true across cultural and historical circumstances. And it’s with those “basics” that the writer of Proverbs is most concerned—with what we might call “conventional wisdom.” In the world-view of the writer, “wisdom” isn’t the same thing as getting a diploma or passing the MCAS. It has little if anything to do with grades. It’s more about life-skills and “street smarts”—it’s about being able to navigate your way in sometimes uncharted waters. It’s about paying attention to the way things work—both to how they are, and how they might yet be. A number of images are used in Proverbs that encourage people to pay attention to nature—and to the world around you. Notice the ant, the writer of Proverbs says in one place. Ants haven’t changed that much over three thousand years, and so the lessons are still pretty much the same. Notice how hard they work, and how organized they are. What are the life-implications you might draw from sitting and watching the ants go marching along two by two some summer afternoon—for the workplace, for the political arena, for what community is all about?

Or the writer of Proverbs says in another place: “what goes around comes around.” That seems to bear out across time—even if it sometimes seems in the short-run to be proven wrong, over

the long-haul it does seem to be right. The writer of Proverbs could have told you that sooner or later the accounting practices at Enron would catch up with them—because no “pyramid scheme” ever works for ever—not in Mesopotamia and not in Texas. Why? Because it’s the way the world is made...it’s just how things work. I graduated from high school in 1981. (I don’t need you to remind me that was a very long time ago!) Some people were saying in the early eighties that “greed was good.” It wasn’t, and it isn’t—and the writer of this poem could have warned us that was not true...and that sooner or later greed consumes us.

Albert Einstein once said the most basic question is whether or not the universe is a friendly place. That is, “does it make sense?” Both he and the writer of Proverbs concluded that the answer is yes. Not every day...and certainly some days and months and even years are crazier than others. But in the end, there is a kind of sense to the way things work out. In the end the truth does come to light: eventually the truth really is stronger than lies, and justice really is stronger than evil. These are the kinds of things that the writer of Proverbs cares about. He doesn’t say “thus says the Lord;” but rather, “pay attention.” Keep your eyes and ears open! He acknowledges that while the cynics will be able to find exceptions to the rule—the exceptions still prove the rule.

So whoever first wrote this poem about “The True Wealth” has come to believe that the universe really is, at it’s foundations, a friendly place—and that there is a basic goodness to life and to people and to the world. Moreover, that one finds true happiness by discerning the truths that go the very heart of life itself, and by paying attention to the world around us.

The poem consists of four couplets that speak of a movement from discovery to awareness, and from awareness to action. Implicit in the poem is the suggestion that people who chase after wealth die unfulfilled. While everybody needs to put food on the table and “make a living,” life is more than food—and people do not live by bread alone. Rather, the poem claims, real wealth is found by pursuing simpler things, truer things, more life-giving things like family and friendship and safer communities and excellent public education—things like life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We’ve begun to realize anew over the past few years that these things are not “givens”—they need to be valued and they require commitment and dedication and hard work.

This poem begins and ends with the same word: “happy.” It’s the same word used in the Sermon on the Mount—although there it usually gets translated as “blessed” (as in “blessed are the peacemakers...”) That doesn’t mean life is a bowl of cherries. In fact, true happiness almost always requires some amount of struggle and difficulty and challenge. But this kind of happiness is trying to convey that life’s purpose and meaning and lasting joys are found in the truth—by following the path of wisdom.

Now here is the last thing I want to say to you this night. I bet that there is not a single graduate here who doesn’t already know this. I bet that I’ve not said anything tonight that you don’t already know in your bones—at least if you are anything like the graduating seniors I know from my parish.

The problem is not in *knowing* it now, however, but in *remembering* it as your life journey continues. If there is anyone here tonight who may need to be reminded of what the true wealth is, it is perhaps your parents. They deserve a little slack, however, because most of them have to worry about things like college tuition payments. But there is a great temptation—beyond our needs—to confuse what we “want” with what we think we need. And so, too, there is a great temptation as life unfolds to become like that businessman in St. Exupery’s *Le Petit Prince*—so self-absorbed with what we believe to be “important” that we forget how to be alive.

The paradox, then, of a poem like this is that it reminds us that one generation doesn’t ever have all this figured out so it can be passed along. In truth, it generates conversation. You have at least as much to teach us as we have to teach you, and on some of the really important stuff, probably more. I don’t think there are a lot of people walking around who think that all that really matters is how much money you make or what kind of car you drive. But all of us are surrounded by subtle (and not so subtle) messages that tempt us to become forgetful.

When you find yourself tempted in that direction, all I can really do is invite you to turn to the wisdom of the sages—to the wisdom of the ages—to people like the writer of Proverbs, who simply bear witness to the truths we already know deep down inside—the truths that keep us on track. And when you are as old as I am, be sure you find some seventeen year old or eighteen year old to help remind you of who you are right now—of what you care most passionately about—because I assure you that will be well worth remembering.

If you want to find true happiness, seek wisdom. It is worth more than all the silver and gold and stock options in the world—more precious than fancy cars. Nothing can compare with her, for she leads people toward true shalom—to full and abundant life.

Richard M. Simpson
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