

Jon Hauerwas – September 16, 2018 – “In Search of Wisdom”
Psalm 19:1-14 and Proverbs 1:2-23, 32-33

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is hard. “According to a recent survey by the American College Health Association, 52 percent of students reported feeling hopeless, while 39 percent suffered from such severe depression that they had found it difficult to function at some point during the previous year.”¹ These numbers paint a stark portrait of the inner wrestling associated with the human condition. Who are we? What do we wish to become? And what will our legacy be?

As one assumes the mantle of adulthood, the wrestling continues. Without a doubt, the modern world presents unique challenges – namely, our 24/7 connectivity. “We know what this looks like: We have all seen (or perhaps been) parents who are on the phone at soccer games trying to manage both worlds at once. Feelings of guilt plague this generation for not being able to do more, create more, and serve more. The exhaustion and fear of failure becomes paralyzing. Social media gives a false impression of the success of others who post seductive images of perfectly coiffed, well-behaved children in matching outfits, phenomenal vacations and generous gifts

¹ “How to Be Happier.” *The Week*. August 17/August 24, 2018, Vol. 18, Issue 886/887. Page 36.

of cars and jewelry from adoring spouses who always remember birthdays and anniversaries.”²

But, the need for wisdom in guiding one’s decision-making and life course is a universal truth that has shaped our species from the beginning of time. Humans make complex tools and problem solve at levels unmatched on earth. We communicate messages and share knowledge through a variety of verbal and nonverbal cues. We are capable of participating in both incredible acts of compassion and intentional, unprovoked violence. Finally, we have seen too much deception and know too much pain to live a carefree existence.

“Professor Laurie Santos didn’t set out to create the most popular course in the history of Yale University and the most talked-about college course in America. She just wanted her students to be happy.” Yet, over 1,200 students are now enrolled in her Psych 157 offering, entitled Psychology and the Good Life.³ The takeaway is this: once our necessities are covered, money cannot buy happiness, but time can. According to Santos, “Happy people devote time to family and friends. They practice gratitude. They practice optimism. They are physically active. They ‘savor life’s pleasures and try to live in the moment.’”⁴

² Victoria A. White. “Who Will You Disappoint?” *Presbyterian Outlook*, January 29, 2018, Vol. 200, No. 02. Pg. 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

Thousands of years ago, other professors offered sagely wisdom. Their insights, too, were originally intended for youth on the cusp of adulthood. Recorded for posterity, we now call their reflections Proverbs, and we read them aloud in worship as Holy Scripture. You may know that, in many cultures, words are either feminine or masculine, rather than neutral, as they are in English. The Hebrew word for wisdom is feminine, and in the book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman who “presents a character resume specifically designed for the inquirer to embody.”⁵ By describing her own character, she invites imitation. “Wisdom walks the paths of righteousness and justice. To do so is an act of love.”⁶

“Every human needs wisdom for living, and every healthy society hands its wisdom on to the next generation.”⁷ “Someone who has character is one who exercises sound judgment, knows what is right, and has the courage to act on it.”⁸ Through wisdom, human beings learn to cope with the world and live happy and successful lives. Of great concern to the sages was the consequences of human choices upon individuals and society.” “Wisdom requires reverence for God and a

⁵ William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014). Pg. 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *The Book of Proverbs, The New International Bible Commentary Volume V*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1997). Pg. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

general knowledge of how the world and humans work.” Wise people know the way things “ought to be,” and they know what the present moment and its constituents require.”⁹

But, “human wisdom has limits.”¹⁰ “Not even the wise can comprehend all of the contradictions and mysteries of life, of God and cosmos.”¹¹ “Moral virtue is no guarantee of success, and success is not necessarily a sign of moral integrity.”¹² “The wicked can prosper, especially in a time of chaos, and the righteous can suffer unjustly. Still, Proverbs insists that it is better to be poor and godly than rich and wicked.”¹³

What humans *can* be responsible for is the loves that we choose.¹⁴ But, “when love is misplaced, when one loses direction, when boundaries are violated, when creation’s goods are misappropriated, then the good become harmful and damage is done. Consequently, wisdom implies love within limits, freedom within form, and life within law.”¹⁵

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

In his essay, “How the Oldest of the Old Taught Me to Choose Happiness,” John Leland writes, “Being an expert is exhausting. Being a student – letting go of your ego – is like sitting for a banquet at the best restaurant you’ll ever visit.”¹⁶ And, in the New Testament, wisdom parallels are embodied in Jesus. “Jesus speaks in long discourses, as did Woman Wisdom (Prov. 1:20-33; 8). Wisdom invites people to partake of her rich banquet, where food and drink symbolize life and closeness to God. (Prov. 9:2-5). Jesus does the same, saying: ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ (John 6:35; Prov. 9:1-6, 11). Just as wisdom seeks friends (Prov. 1:20-21; 8:1-4), so also Jesus recruits followers (John 1:36-38, 43).”¹⁷

We all understand that we live in a polarized age where the political right is yielding little ground on the virtues of liberty and the free market and the political left is yielding little ground on the virtues of inclusion and diversity.¹⁸ Yet, as George Anderson rightly notes, “even in a time that needs a prophetic witness, the church still needs the leadership of those who hold the middle and patiently strive to move communities forward without leaving too many behind. We need to celebrate

¹⁶ *Presbyterian Outlook*, March 5, 2018, Vol. 200, No. 04. Pg. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ George C. Anderson, “Leadership of the Saints and Sages,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, January 29, 2018, Vol. 200, No. 02. Pg. 30.

leaders who visit, organize, compromise and mediate, who listen with empathy, who are more steady than strident and who disappoint the extremes (and live with disappointment in themselves). Without these sages, there will be no church for the saints.”¹⁹

And so we come in search of wisdom. May it be so, and all thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.