

LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Owe One Another *Part 3: Life Long Learning*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Proverbs 4: 20-27 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

We are in part three of a series on community - what it means to be a church. We all know our experiences from the past and some of those are good and a lot of them are bad. We are trying to think creatively about how we can design a community particularly for the children that are coming up - to give them gifts that we did not receive.

The first thing I think a community owes one another is a *covenant of kindness*, where when people join St. Andrews they make a pledge to honor each other's spirit - to not say bad things about one another - to not laugh or say cruel things.

The second covenant or commitment would be to *live from the roots*, which means to remember to make time to find what is sacred to you, whether it's writing, running, meditating, praying, whatever it is that gets you to your own roots, to spend enough time where you can live out of that. Today we are looking at the idea of *lifelong learning*. If the purpose of the church is to learn and teach how to love - and I believe that's at least what it should be - then that's what we are trying to learn to do. What are the basics of loving, what are the fundamentals of loving? That would be the gift not only that we would want to give our children, but to give to each other. To me, to teach children to memorize answers, when it comes to their spiritual journey, is nothing short of child abuse. And I experienced that as a child, and possibly you did, too. Where they took the burning questions I had and gave me memorized answers. I want to say again that is child abuse, I believe. What we want to do is to fan that flame, to encourage those questions and to realize that faith is that honest pursuit of truth. That's a gift we can give our children. We don't want to create more "zombies for Christ"...(*laughter*) where you just memorize the words of the dead, you try to imitate the dead, Isn't that very inspiring?

I saw a candidate that was running for School Board who said the gift she wanted to give the children was to help them be productive members of the new economy. How did education fall to that...to inspire somebody to be a cog in a machine? And the church needs to do better than that. Our purpose is not to teach children the propaganda of our sect, not Presbyterian, not even Christian. The core of what Christ taught was calling us to be human beings, universal human beings, and that's what we are trying to learn and to teach. But isn't it interesting how education is seen as something that addresses children? And because for most of us it was abusive, as soon as we get old enough, we don't want to

do it anymore. Many of our children simply get dropped off for our Sunday educational events. And if anything important happens, like a soccer match, then spiritual learning is jettisoned altogether. If this lesson - to be a loving human being, is the most important thing that we want to give our children, then it needs to be presented as such. The religious education I was given, I saw the holes in it. I knew it was miserable, but I also knew from my parents' conduct that it was the most important thing. And what I realized is "when I get out of here, I want to learn that important thing." We need to model lifelong learning if we really think it's important. I know that may sound like a guilt trip. I know there are incredible pressures that fall on everybody in this culture, and I am not making this case specific to St Andrew's. But I am saying this: if you don't think you can give that to your children here, then find the place where you can. If we are not giving that gift, and you don't think there's a potential of helping us do a better job, find the place that is. Let your children know that's the most important part of their lives - not church per se, but their spiritual quest, their quest to know what love is, what life is. They are already coming from that place. We dare not dampen that spirit. That's what they want to know, that's what those questions are going to lead to - to the depth.

I'll never forget a conversation I had after I got out of Seminary. A minister friend took me to visit another minister and we were going through a library. The second minister wasn't there yet. We were sitting there in his office and my friend was just looking over all the shelves. He said, "I love minister's offices. I love their libraries." I said, "Why is that?" He responded "I always like trying to figure out what year their mind died."

(extended laughter) I understand exactly what he was saying. You look through the books, and see what year they got so busy in what they were doing that their own spiritual quest was extinguished. I have a lot of sympathy for people who do that. I was a lot less charitable toward preachers and ministers when I was younger. I am still pretty savage now, *(laughter)* but at least I realize the complexities of that life and how important it is to move that to the center. If the ancients were right - the classical thinkers - that the universe is static, that when you got out of school you could just keep remembering what it was that you learned and you would be fine. But in an evolving universe, in a changing universe, if you're not learning you are getting dumber. Think about that. If the world is changing and you keep the same static ideaswas that too harsh? *(laughter)* I hope you get my point that if we are not learning throughout our whole lives, life leaves us behind. It is a very tragic thing, somebody living in an idea system that no longer works, and they are having to rationalize why things don't work.

What I want to do is point out three things...*(of course)* big surprise! And these are the three things that all education should teach. Is that insane enough for you? Clearly this is my best attempt at it and you may do much better, but I think these are the foundations that a church or school or any education should give children.

The three, I'll go ahead and give it to you so you can go ahead and daydream if you want.

1. Nature is our home.
2. Humankind is our family.
3. Reason is our light.

These are lessons we have to be reminded of our whole lives. We remember them one day and we get busy and we forget them. So a lot of what education is doing is returning to those same basic truths. Nature is our home, humankind is our family, and reason is our light. We'll be looking at the teaching of Solomon. Solomon was considered the wisest person of all time by some. This is the advice he gave to his children. But if you read church history or Biblical history and you realize that all the children went crazy, you probably have to realize this is going to take a little bit of adaptation here. Wise people aren't always good parents. So sometimes the advice has jewels in it but you have to kind of polish them. We are going to look at three things Solomon is saying and twist them until they make my point...(laughter) hopefully not, hopefully not.

Solomon says ...(that sounds like a game) (laughter) at one point, to look straight ahead, at what is ahead of you, what is in front of you. That may not seem like profound advice, but I think it really is. Our ideas of life can get so complicated and so hypothetical that we go off seeking imaginary possibilities and wind up ignorant of the place. When I got out of Dallas, when I hit the road to University of Texas, I studied every weird thing I could find because I had been bored in church for so long. I studied all of the wonderful possibility things of reality. But what I realized was that ultimately that pursuit was not for truth. I was escaping the pain and the boredom of my life - that ultimately we come home to ordinary reality. The miracle is waiting there for us. After we have studied every esoteric art there is, we come back to our homes, to our families, to our friends, to our bodies and we have to realize that is the home that we have to make peace with. Chasing after hypotheticals can be fun, it's a good hobby, but wisdom is coming home to the world in which we live.

There is a Buddhist saying that many of the ascended spiritual masters could walk on water. The real miracle is to walk on earth - to walk through your ordinary life and see the miracle there. Every cell in your body is calibrated for this planet. Every emotion within you is calibrated for this place and this time. So wisdom should lead us here. I spent so much time trying to meditate so I could get a higher vibration because that's what the book said. So I was meditating "ommmmm". They even had a little thing that when you tapped it, it made the sound of "omm". It was the right pitch for the whole universe. What I finally realized is get a life and if I want higher vibrations, I'll buy a whistle. (laughter) Because you have to live with all the vibrations up and down. Bats have higher vibrations, they are not more spiritually profound than whales with lower vibrations. The whole thing. We have to deal with the whole thing.

The second thing Solomon *wishes* he had said: (laughter) Throughout the Proverbs it equates wisdom also with not doing evil things, not doing bad things. I had a wonderful kind of confrontation this last week. A loving friend came up and said, "You know, in every sermon you ever do, you get back to social justice. It is almost like you have this computer screen in your mind and at some point the little menu drops down, and whatever the text says it doesn't matter. At that point you are going to see something about social justice in there." I take that to heart and I will look at that, but here's what I believe: I believe that the texts originally had politics written into them. When Jesus talked about loving other people, it included not mistreating other people. The church de-politicized that message so that it would be possible to have a relationship with God and at the same time, treat each other like dogs. But that theology does not survive the trip up the Sermon on the Mount. What does love mean if we can mistreat one another? As soon as another person walks into the room...there is politics. Ever notice that? So however much we want to rise above that, it doesn't matter. That is part of the sinews of our lives. Part of the responsibility of a loving person is to take seriously the power relationships and to balance them as best we can so that life is fair.

In America we are taught private world views. You have your world view, I have mine. We just don't step on each other's toes and everything is fine. That's not what the wisdom teachers said. The wisdom teachers said that we have to move from that to communion. If I am not in relationship with you, if I don't even know who you are, how can I love you? How can I love you if I don't even listen to you? What does that kind of love even mean? So part of what theology is doing - and it's a hit and miss, trial and error that stretches out over centuries - is having a conversation of how can we live on this planet together. How can we look at the world - this is what theology is - how can we look at the world as though we love everybody the same way? *What would the world look like if we fell in love with every body and every thing?* That's what theology should express poetically. The way I express that is to realize that humankind is our family.

If nature is the place we are going to settle when all is said and done, we have to realize that all our projects, sectarian religion, nations, are a subset of our real family and nothing can replace that, nothing justifies mistreating people just because they were born on another side of the line. Now some people might say I may be projecting that onto the text, but I see it right there. When Jesus talks about love, he says, "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, raise up the low places, lower the high places."

Then Solomon says above all, guard your own heart. It's kind of an interesting turn in the text. What's happening inside of you is very, very important. Wisdom is not just ideas, wisdom is organic. It goes into your very being, into your glands. It's the integrity between what's happening at your glandular level and what's happening at your best reason...making sure those are in alignment, connected. Without emotions, life would not be worth living. Without reason, the emotions become slavery. They'll call you in a thousand different directions that contradict one another if you don't have something that's watching over them. So what Solomon means, I think, is not that we should become numb and not feel anything, but to keep our different emotions in harmony, and reason plays that role. It's reason that tells you that the other person's pain is the same as yours. You don't feel that naturally. Reason teaches you that another's pain is the same as your pain. When you're depressed and you think of memories, they are all going to be depressed memories of times you failed, times you disappointed somebody. That's all that that emotion can pump out. Reason says "test that, there *are* people who like you, there *are* people who respect you". When you are angry, and you've thought of the perfect thing you can send in an e-mail...perfect. This will go straight into the heart and rip it open, and you've done it and it's just perfect. The ice pick is ready to go. Reason is that thing that says "Why don't you sleep on this?" You feel better, that's cathartic, that's very good. Sleep on it, and reason is the thing that makes you erase that email the next day. Making people hurt the way that you hurt is not communication. When I am very angry, I want you to feel my pain, so I want to hurt you. That's what anger can do, reason says "don't do that." You are not a bad person for having those feelings, but you are going to live in that nest tomorrow so be careful what you say and do. This is the advice that I think Solomon is giving. You go with your emotions, those are the very pith of life but you always take the chaperone, reason, into that.

What I want to attach to this that I think is shown in Solomon is that it hurts to acquire this kind of wisdom sometimes. One of the things that happens very often when people come to St. Andrew's, is they go through a sad time, because you are not just learning new ideas. When your ideas about the world change, when your ideas about what a human being is changes, you have to feel that emotionally and even if your brain knows all of this stuff, your heart is going to take time. So what Solomon said is, "if you want wisdom, go to the house of mourning, not to the house of mirth." Those ideas that

disturb you contain enormous amounts of insight and wisdom. Emotions keep us from looking outside the window and looking at ourselves as others see us. That's why we need to live in community. When I am angry, I can't really be angry and not get that tunnel vision. In community, the emotion doesn't throw me off in the same way. When I'm sad, I have to slow down, I have to detach. In the ancient world, in the old Temple, they had a door where people who were mourning went through. They would go through that door and everybody would see that and say don't ask anything of them, maybe give them a hug, go up to them, but don't ask them to be on a committee when they've gone through that door. That's the kind of wisdom that Solomon was talking about which is why when he asked for wisdom he prayed for a listening heart.

Our children are going to learn from us and we will either give them the same bad things that we received, or nothing, or we'll come up with another possibility. We will teach them what it means to be human beings, not what it means to be a Presbyterian. These children will not memorize answers. They will present questions that the community will rejoice in. Eartha Kitt used to say, I am learning all my life. My tombstone will be my diploma. Can we, as adults, bring that kind of spirit to every aspect of education in this community so that when children see us and hear us talk about the spiritual life it won't be the last thing on the list that gets checked off? It won't be the thing we do when every thing else is covered. They will know from the inside out that learning what a human being is and loving ourselves and each other is the most important thing a human being can do. Again, those three lessons to consider, they are my suggestions, not necessarily yours, but my suggestions are these: 1) an education that focuses on nature as our home, 2) humankind as our family, and 3) reason as our light.

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