

Wise God, Wise People

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

February 1, 2015

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. . . .” -- Psalm 111:10

I've spoken to you before of my grandmother, the woman who wasn't actually related to me, but who filled that role in my life after I became an orphan. Her name was Pearl. There was a grandfather, too, and his name was Cyril. And although she ran the day-to-day affairs of their household and home, we all knew that Cyril was the boss.

He worked long hours in their coal yard, making sure that people could keep their homes warm, and he apparently was a terrible businessman. When people ran out of money, he let them have coal on credit, telling them they could pay him during the warmer months. Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't, but he never refused people coal. Pearl kept the books and it drove her crazy. We knew Grandpa was a kind man, but we also knew he had a ferocious temper, and when he said, “Don't make me come in there,” we knew he meant it, and if we grandkids were so out of control we didn't heed his warning, there would be hell to pay. Yes, Grandpa was a kind man, but we were all a little afraid of Cyril.

I suspect more than a few of us carry memories like that from childhood with us today, and perhaps now we're the enforcer. Times have changed, and I suspect there are far more time-outs than whippings these days, but the dynamic is the same: if you don't behave, something bad will happen to you.

Let's unhook that dynamic and those childhood memories from the phrase “the fear of the Lord,” which, this morning's text tells us, is the beginning of wisdom. I don't think beatings make one wise, just as I don't think being afraid of a parent makes one wise. When many of us hear that phrase, “the fear of the Lord,” some version of that scene from *The Wizard of Oz* comes to mind in which Dorothy and her friends are cowering and stammering before “the great and powerful Oz,” who smokes and bellows and frightens and scolds – oh, my – until they discover that the real wizard is the little man behind the curtain.

For the people who gave us the phrase “the fear of the Lord,” there was a large element of that Wizard-of-Oz kind of fear in their understanding of the deity. It's hard for us modern people to realize how powerless our ancestors felt against the forces of nature, when childbirth often meant death for someone, and an insect scratch could kill you.

Our machines have multiplied our control over the physical world to a degree unimaginable to the people who gave us the Bible, and yet, even we, with our apparently limitless technological wizardry, seem incapable of controlling those basic realities that still define much of life: death and birth, hate and love, fear and prejudice, lust and greed. We seem to be precious little better at controlling those aspects of reality than Cain or Samson or David was, and so we know, even if we don't often admit, that there is a vast reality that controls us – unpredictable, deeply mysterious, and often painful. From the time we harnessed the dangerous and awesome power of fire, we've labored mightily to extend our control over more and more of our environment, and when we reach the limits of our control, we reach the limits of our sense of security, and we are up against the void of fear – and that may be where our generation and every generation senses the fear of

the Lord.

A space, a gap opens between what is and what we sense ought to be, and that's the place of reverence, of acknowledging that we cannot bridge that gap on our own. A voice calls to us from the other side, and we strive to respond, a few of us succeeding at times, but more often than not, most of us neither hearing nor heeding.

And so the suffering of the world persists, and some people see it and fall into despair, and others see it and fall into cynicism. The vast majority distract themselves from seeing the world's pain with malls or chat rooms or happy hours, or attempt to arm themselves against the pain with guns and fundamentalism, and sleepwalk through the wreckage they help to make.

But in every place and in every age there's always been a minority – sometimes a tiny minority – who have refused to join the chorus in praise of folly. The Bible calls them wise and says that their wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

Once upon a time, I believed, like the Scarecrow, that those majestic and mysterious places called universities were the repositories of wisdom, and that one went to a university not to acquire the skills of a trade but rather to receive wisdom from the collective mind of the learned. I still remember the moment, thirty years ago, when I stepped for the first time into Harvard Yard, with Widener Library on my right and The Memorial Church on my left, and I thought how well those dour Puritans understood today's text: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Harvard has changed, as all of our institutions of higher education have, becoming more and more trade schools for managers of hedge funds and harvesters of data, and less and less the places where teachers and administrators shape characters as well as intellects *in loco parentis*.

And so it's up to us in the church to preserve wisdom as well as virtue, to remain the wise people of a wise God, and if you want to know why I'm your pastor or anyone's pastor, that's the main reason. I went into the service of the church because I looked at my culture and asked where was wisdom to be found, and the best answer I could find was the church.

The shaping of character, our own and those who will come after us, is the making of our true selves, and to make a self is life's greatest adventure. When I ask you to pray, or to read your Bibles, or to come to church, or to help Kathy with Loaves and Fishes or Pat with Bread for the World, I'm inviting you to join us in the world's largest and richest think tank, the Christian church.

The life of faith is a cradle-to-grave adventure for which there is no comparison. The project is yourself – your discipleship as a follower of Jesus, your walk with God – and it's absolutely unique. If it's done well, it's dazzlingly beautiful. Every book ever written is part of your research. Every person who's ever lived is a model for you to examine. Every disaster that's ever befallen us is a teachable moment.

The whole world is our laboratory, and the hypotheses we're testing are the articles of faith: Is love really stronger than death? Can peace finally break the cycle of violence? Do we really find our lives by losing them? Will God's word be the last word?

Wall Street doesn't ask those questions. Main Street doesn't ask those questions. Congress doesn't ask those questions. And yet, when all is said and done, those are the only questions and the only answers that really matter. They are the gifts of God for the people of God – if we're wise enough to receive them.