

# **First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan**

**Sunday, July 11, 2021**

**The Book of Proverbs**

**“God’s Wisdom is More Precious than Anything”**

**Rev. Ashley S. Ashley**

## **Rev. Ashley — Welcome, Announcements, and Opening Prayer**

Hello everyone and welcome to the worship of God today, Sunday, July 11<sup>th</sup>, at the First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. My name is Ashley and I am just so excited to have you all in worship this morning with us. I'm also excited to share that my partner in crime this morning is none other than my husband Brendan Ashley. Brendan has finished the ordination process in the PC USA and he is currently seeking a call here in the Detroit Presbytery, but it's always nice just to have him with us sharing his gifts and passions with our community.

I'm also joined in worship today by Darlene Maginley, who will give our children's message. Our music this morning is provided by Bekah Brudi. A big thank you to everyone who helps make these services possible, week after week. It's quite a production, but done with love, of course, to our Lord, so that you all can enjoy worship wherever He's going to find you today.

I have one very special announcement today coming from Susan Underhill herself as a reminder of our returning to the full use of the building on September 1<sup>st</sup>. If you have a group that is interested in using one of the rooms in our church, you need to get your building use form in to Susan, so that she can reserve the rooms for you. Those forms can be found either right outside of Susan's office door, or feel free to shoot her an email and she can send them to you. She needs those completed forms so we can get back to being together here, beginning on September 1<sup>st</sup>.

I'm very, very excited for that, as you can tell! In terms of other announcements, while July tends to be a little slower around here at the church, as we all engage in different rhythms of rest that summer bring us, it isn't to say that there's nothing going on! I invite you to take a look at this morning's bulletin, at the Friday newsletter, or, of course, the church calendar, to see what is going on here in the life of FPCP.

At this moment let us prepare our hearts for worship as we are lead in to our opening prayer by Brendan.

## **Brendan Ashley — Opening Prayer**

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, you are infinite and eternal and unchangeable, glorious in holiness, full of love and compassion, and abundant in grace and truth. The beauty of this world sings your praise, and your glory is revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We praise you for gathering us here today. Prepare us now for worship, focus our attention, and change our hearts. And, united in your Spirit, in this moment may we have thoughts only of you. Amen.

## **Bekah Brudi sings “*To You Be the Glory*”**

### **Darlene Maginley, Director of Children’s Ministry – Children’s Message**

Good morning, kids. If I told you that we were going to go out and find some buried treasure, or we were going to find some lost treasure, what would you think? Would you probably think of a bold pirate ship, or maybe you would think about the seven dwarfs from Snow White going off to dig, dig for diamonds and rubies in the mine.

What if I told you that the Bible says that there is a treasure that is more important than silver or gold or rubies or precious gems. Would you be surprised? I know I am, but the Bible tells us that wisdom is the biggest treasure you can have.

Well, now, what is wisdom? You know what “smart” is, because you can be smart in math or you can be smart in reading, but did you know that wisdom is different than being smart?

Wisdom is knowing what's right and what's wrong, and what's most important, and making the most important choices in life. Wisdom is knowing that it's wrong to steal the pack of gum from the grocery store that Mom said you couldn't have, but you really want. Wisdom is knowing that it's not right to argue with Dad when he tells you to take out the trash, even though you want to finish the video game that you're playing first. And wisdom means knowing that it's wrong to lie to mom and dad, even if you're going to get in a little trouble for doing something wrong, and then lying to them on top of it. Wisdom is knowing that you will know a lot of trouble in life.

Wisdom, even more importantly than all of the things here on earth, wisdom is knowing that the most important thing, the most important choice that you can make in your life, is believing in Jesus and following Jesus no matter what else happens here on earth. Sometimes you may get made fun of for going to church or for believing in Jesus. Wisdom is knowing that it's way more important to believe in Jesus and follow him than to worry about if our friends are teasing us or if we feel a little embarrassed here on earth.

So I would like you, this week, not to search for buried treasure or go out in your backyard and dig for hidden gold, but I would like you to open your Bible this week and find a little bit of true wisdom.

Let's pray together. Dear God, please help us to be wise in all things, help us to make good choices, learn how best to listen to you and to follow you and to know that no matter what happens here on earth that the most important wisdom that we can ever gain is learning about you so that one day we can live with you in heaven, for eternity. Thank you for helping us to gain wisdom. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### **Brendan Ashley – Scripture Reading**

#### **Proverbs 2:1-10**

My son, if you accept my words  
and store up my commands within you,

<sup>2</sup> turning your ear to wisdom  
and applying your heart to understanding—  
<sup>3</sup> indeed, if you call out for insight  
and cry aloud for understanding,  
<sup>4</sup> and if you look for it as for silver  
and search for it as for hidden treasure,  
<sup>5</sup> then you will understand the fear of the LORD  
and find the knowledge of God.  
<sup>6</sup> For the LORD gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.  
<sup>7</sup> He holds success in store for the upright,  
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,  
<sup>8</sup> for he guards the course of the just  
and protects the way of his faithful ones.

<sup>9</sup> Then you will understand what is right and just  
and fair—every good path.  
<sup>10</sup> For wisdom will enter your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

### **Proverbs 3:13-18**

<sup>13</sup> Blessed are those who find wisdom,  
those who gain understanding,  
<sup>14</sup> for she is more profitable than silver  
and yields better returns than gold.  
<sup>15</sup> She is more precious than rubies;  
nothing you desire can compare with her.  
<sup>16</sup> Long life is in her right hand;  
in her left hand are riches and honor.  
<sup>17</sup> Her ways are pleasant ways,  
and all her paths are peace.  
<sup>18</sup> She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;  
those who hold her fast will be blessed.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

### **Rev. Ashley — Sermon: “God’s Wisdom Is More Precious than Anything”**

Friends, let us pray. Gracious and loving God, open our hearts and minds to hear the wisdom of your Word, as it is read and proclaimed today. May we come to understand just how precious your Word really is. Amen.

Well, as many of you are already aware, this weekend, downtown Plymouth welcomes nearly 400 artists! I had to look at that twice because it just seems so many to believe, but Plymouth welcomes nearly 400 artists and almost 300,000 visitors to the area for the 41st annual Art in the Park, here in downtown Plymouth. This is the second largest art festival in Michigan. People gather from all over the country to enjoy thousands of original pieces, including ceramics, sculptures, mixed media and folk art. There is, I've been told, a little bit of something for everyone. I love these kinds of art festivals! Growing up, I can remember going to all sorts of ones in my hometown or in the area surrounding my

hometown. I am not a very artistically inclined or crafty person, myself, so I really love seeing what people create by hand or dream up in their mind and put on paper or weave out of material.

It's inspiring to see what people do with the gifts and talents that God has given them. Some of my absolute favorite pieces of jewelry and home décor and especially some of my favorite baking spices have been found at art festivals, like the one we are enjoying in Plymouth now. Earlier today I was actually looking at a map of all of the vendors that are going to be present this weekend for the art festival and I was carefully planning my own game plan, how would I approach going to the art festival. Of course you need to know who are the vendors that you most want to visit, what is the best path to get from one place to the other, and the most important question of all, where are the food stands in the midst of all of these vendors!

Venturing out into a busy street during art-fest can feel a little bit like a treasure hunt. I have no idea what I might find. I have no idea what's in store out there, but I know that there is something good waiting for me, something just in the next stand, or around the corner and in the next line of artisans' booths, something that will bring me joy and definitely belongs in my home.

It's easy to get all caught up in the excitement and the joy that is surrounding us in these moments, and while there is nothing wrong with appreciating the gifts that people have and supporting, financially, their livelihoods by purchasing these goods, our scripture passages for this morning want to remind us that while we can find great joy in jewelry and paintings and sculptures and gold and silver and in rubies, that there is something even more precious that we should be spending our time searching for.

Last week, Mark kicked off our summer series in Proverbs, a book that is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, the son of King David, who was blessed by God with great wisdom and insight. The purpose of Proverbs is to pass along the wisdom of God to God's people, to teach us how to pursue God's wisdom and to avoid the foolishness and folly of this world.

The opening lines of our reading from Proverbs 3 today set the stage for our quest for wisdom. It reads,

“Blessed are those who find wisdom,  
those who gain understanding”

Now “blessed” is a term that is thrown around a lot in our culture, but its root is actually quite profound. The Hebrew word here means to experience divine favor and it's meant to sum up the abundance of joy and goodness that a person experiences when they choose to walk in the ways of the Lord. One writer states that the term was reserved for people who experience life optimally, as God, the Creator, originally intended it to be lived.

Clearly the author of Proverbs wants us to understand that God's wisdom is something to be deeply desired and passionately pursued. His efforts to convince us of this fact don't stop at verse 13. In fact, his rave review of wisdom continues into the next five verses.

First, the value of God's wisdom is compared to precious materials. In verses 14 and 15 we read that wisdom is more profitable than silver and yields better return than gold. “She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.” The comparison here is rather straightforward. Of course, silver, gold, rubies, and other precious materials

are to be desired. They're beautiful to look at and, of course, they can be traded for other important goods like food and shelter and clothing. But while material items may enrich our physical lives now, only wisdom, God's wisdom, can enrich our spiritual lives forever.

The exact ability of wisdom to ultimately enrich is found next in verses 16 and 17. Verses 16 and 17 state:

<sup>16</sup> Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.

<sup>17</sup> Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.

Throughout the book of Proverbs we see wisdom personified as a woman, one who works on behalf of God to train God's people in the ways of wisdom and reward them for their good and faithful obedience. Here, we see Lady Wisdom offering the gifts available to those who value wisdom and a description of what kind of blessing awaits those who gain understanding.

Now I want to clarify that following the wisdom and counsel of God does not guarantee an easy life here on earth. There are countless faithful followers all around the world, in our congregation, and our innermost circle of friends and family, who follow God faithfully and yet still experience hardship, suffering and grief.

Friends, the world is broken and that is a truth! Those of us who live in it still experience the painful effects of that brokenness each and every day. What verse 16 offers is not a promise of a perfect life but a promise of hope for those who abide in the wisdom of God.

Even if we do not experience the rewards of wisdom here on earth and in this life, surely we will experience them in the life that is to come. Additionally, this knowledge of who God is, and what God has done, and what God promises to do for us in our future can act as a kind of comfort in the here and now. Regardless of our experiences in this life, wisdom offers us a long eternal life filled with riches and with honor, and as we journey onwards, regardless of what happens around us, we can fix our eyes on the promise and look for the pleasant ways that God is offering God's peace right here and right now.

This promise that wisdom brings hope and new life is further reinforced in verse 18, which states that wisdom "is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed."

This image brings us simultaneously back to the garden of Eden and the book of Genesis and forward to the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation.

When Adam and Eve decided to eat from the tree in the garden, they decided to rely on their own wisdom instead of on God's wisdom. Thus they were cast out of the garden and away from the full presence of God. But God intends for that relationship to be restored and for all of us to be with God, so if we accept the wisdom of God, if we allow it to guide our way, then that wisdom will lead us straight to the 'tree of life' where we will be invited to feast on its fruit and enjoy all of the glory and honor, the majesty of God's Kingdom, forever. With that image, that final image of the tree of life, our passage ends the same way as it began, with a promise that those who hold fast to wisdom will indeed be blessed twice.

Now the author of Proverbs has indicated that wisdom isn't something that is simply handed out at random. It is something to be grasped, something to be found and something to be gained. These adjectives imply an action on our part and requirement for

participation. This concept is further enforced by our reading from Proverbs, chapter 2, which is written from the perspective of a father. He was giving guidance to the son. In it the father says, "If you accept my words and store my commands within you, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, if you look for wisdom as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God." "Then you will understand what is right and just and fair, every good path. If you do these things, then you will gain wisdom and only then will you experience the blessings of wisdom." So what does this pursuit of wisdom actually look like?

Well, the first directive we receive, it should not surprise us, we are called to accept God's Word and store up God's commands within us. We are invited to engage with the whole body of scripture, the parts that we love and the parts that confuse or even upset us, the parts that clearly speak to our lives today and the parts that require some deep thinking and some careful consideration. Regardless of whether we're hearing the words for the first time or the 101st time, we are called to read each verse, chapter and book with eyes open and hearts attentive because we know that God is using them to transform us into wise and faithful disciples.

Next we are told to call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding. Simply put, ask and you shall receive! James, chapter 1, verse 5 says it this way. "If you need wisdom ask our generous God and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking."

Solomon the renowned wise king was not born exceptionally talented or intelligent. Instead, we read in scripture that he asked God for a discerning heart and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. He prayed for wisdom and God gave it to him, so in addition to reading scripture and in praying, we are also called to *look* for wisdom, "as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure."

Like gold miners who carefully sift through sediments for flakes of gold among debris, so, too, are we called to develop a discerning and watchful eye for the ways God is speaking all around us. Always look for the way, as God is offering up wisdom in various ways, in music, in books, in sermons, and movies and art, and of course, in encounters with each other.

Finally as the prose style of Proverbs 2 might imply, we pursue wisdom by humbling ourselves and accepting the teachings of others. God speaks wise words through the mouths of our parents and guardians, our neighbors, our Sunday school teachers, our mentors, our Bible study leaders, our friends and, I hope our pastors!

Wisdom is not something we develop alone, but through community, through the sharing of conversations, disagreements and testimony. As iron sharpens iron, we help each other learn how to quiet our own voice and accept the guidance of God.

Friends, wisdom is a gift that comes from God and from God alone. We're not meant to idly sit back and wait for this wisdom! Our practices of reading scripture, praying, listening for the Spirit and learning from others will then create in us a posture of attentiveness, one that is ready to receive the very gift of wisdom that God is so willing to graciously give.

So, this weekend if you find yourself in downtown Plymouth for Art in the Park, I encourage you to delight in the beauty that surrounds you and to admire the talents and

skills of all of those present. Be fully attentive to the goodness that we have in our community. But as you do so, I also encourage you to remember that while we can fill our homes and our lives with beautiful things, we can possess nothing more precious than the wisdom of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

### **Rev. Ashley — Prayers of the People and The Lord's Prayer**

Friends, let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for your divine wisdom, for the ways that it gives us direction and understanding, for the ways that it grants us life, hope and peace, and for the ways it reflects the truth of your love for us, your power at work in this world, and your presence that's with us right here and right now. Teach us to deeply treasure your wisdom as one might treasure precious jewels, how best to search earnestly for your understanding as one might search for gold. We know that wisdom is a gift that only you can give but help us develop postures that are ready to receive this gift.

Bless our practices of scripture reading, prayer, listening to you, and learning from each other, so that we might come to value your Word and guidance above everything else.

As we come to you now, we pray for all of those who are hurting or downcast, those struggling with physical or mental distress, our friends and family, our neighbors who are lonely, disappointed, stressed, and angry, and undergoing moments of deep pain. Bring great comfort, stay by our side as we walk through the valley of evil. Fix our eyes on your promises this morning.

We especially want to lift up the families of all those lost in the building collapse in Florida. Lord of mercy, hear our prayers, hear their prayers. Form us into the body of Christ now as we recite the words that you taught us to pray together saying,

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.

### **Bekah Brudi sings "*Be Thou My Vision*"**

### **Rev. Ashley — Benediction and Blessing**

Friends, as you depart from this space, may you value the wisdom of God and may your heart's greatest desire be for that wisdom. I charge you now, I challenge you, to create postures in your own life that create space so that God can give you this very gracious and wonderful precious gift.

And as you go, may the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; and may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen.