

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Sunday, August 1, 2021

The Book of Proverbs

“Practice & Rituals... Hold to God’s Instructions”

Rev. Ashley S. Ashley

Rev. Ashley S. Ashley — Welcome and Announcements

Good morning, everyone! Hello, and welcome to the worship of God, today, at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. This is Sunday, August 1st. Can you believe it? We have made it to August! It's the last push of summer! I am just so excited to invite you into our space now for this opportunity to be together virtually, united by the Spirit, worshipping our Lord.

I am assisted in worship today by Pastor Mark Hovermale who will be the liturgist. He will also be doing one of our special elements of service today. We will be commissioning all of those who are heading out on our Colina de Luz mission trip that leaves on Tuesday, August 3. Mark will be commissioning them a little bit later.

Our music today is wonderful. We are being joined by the 5th Season Ensemble. We are excited to hear those voices and the joy I am sure that they will bring to our Lord. As I mentioned we have two special elements of worship today, one of them being the Colina mission trip commissioning and the second is that, as today is the first Sunday of the month, we will be partaking in communion together. Now the way that we do it virtually is I will be leading communion via the virtual service, but you are invited to partake at home. I invite you now to take a moment to gather some supplies. They can be anything; God is with us, no matter what! Choose something that can represent the bread, the body of Christ, and the wine, the blood of Christ. I'll give you a few minutes to gather those things now.

Welcome back, friends. I have a couple of announcements to share with you all before we jump into worship. The first comes straight from our session here at the church, so I'm going to read it directly. The session at First Presbyterian Church has called a congregational meeting for next Sunday, August 8th, for the purpose of approving the nominations of elders and deacons for the class of 2024. The meeting will be held in the parking lot here at the church at 10:15 a.m., immediately following the parking lot service. We need a quorum in order to hold this special congregational meeting to elect those new elders and deacons. I am asking that if you plan to come to the parking lot service next week that you would stay just a few minutes after so that we can hold that meeting. If you're planning on coming to the sanctuary service, please come a little bit early in order to participate. In that way, we can get a quorum, elect our elders and deacons, and commission them for the service of God that they have said yes to, which is very exciting.

My second announcement for you all is the reminder that tomorrow, which is August 2nd. we will be welcoming back Pastor Emily to the church after her extended time away on break. I know we're all very excited to see her and I would ask that you would be praying for her as she transitions back into her role and is brought up to speed on all the wonderful

things that we have been doing together as the body of Christ here in Plymouth over the last two months. Emily, we are excited to welcome you back and to see you in the building!

My third reminder for us this morning is about the soft openings that we launched in the sanctuary last week. I want to just remind you all of the worship times that we have for the remainder of the summer. Our outdoor fellowship is now at 9:00 a.m. At 9:30 a.m. is our parking lot service outside with the preaching porch. Then at 11:00 a.m. is our soft reopening for our sanctuary service. It was so much fun being together in there last week! I really encourage you to come and be with us, but as always, if you prefer to do the online prerecorded service, that is exciting and wonderful as well, and that will still be available to you as per usual.

Well, friends, there are many more announcements to share, but I invite you to read about those in our bulletin. A lot of time and attention is put into organizing the bulletin, and you will find all the various ways that you can gather with the people of God and celebrate God within those pages.

Now that we have talked all *about* worship today and the bulletin and the things to come, I invite you to pause and to prepare our hearts for worship in this moment. Let us listen to Pastor Mark read our opening prayer.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Opening Prayer

Let us pray. We come before you, Lord, and we just say thank you for the opportunity to worship you. We thank you for all your gifts that you've given us, especially the gift of wisdom, which we're learning more about in our study of Proverbs. We pray that through this service that we glorify you and then we apply the wisdom we learn to our lives. Amen.

Fifth Season Ensemble sings “I Say Rejoice” Accompanied by Sharon Smith

Rev. Hovermale – Commissioning of the Colina de Luz Mission Trip

Well, this amazing team around me is going to Colina de Luz this coming week as missionaries from our church to our mission partner, Colina de Luz. One of the great opportunities of our church is to commission our missionaries. These local missionaries are going all the way internationally to Colina in Mexico, and we're very excited about it!

Kathy Bernard, Jim Bernard, Anita Hazlewood, Jerry Kmiecziak, Ervin Miller, Patrick Murphy and Dana Stonerook are all going from our church to serve at the amazing Colina de Luz orphanage. We are so excited! Many of this team have gone multiple years to Colina.

As I was looking through scripture, this scripture passage really hit home. The passage is in in Romans, chapter 10.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?

As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

How amazing, you can be part of the calling of them, in the commissioning of them, to preach, not just in words, but all the time in actions.

Ephesians 2:10 says,

¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Isn't it amazing, you guys? God knew you were going to Colina before we even thought you'd be able to, and he's already prepared the work you're going to do! This is an exciting opportunity for the church.

One very neat thing about First Presbyterian is we are mission-oriented. Many people say that is one of their favorite things about this church. This group around me--they're getting to serve Christ by going to serve Colina de Luz

Let’s pray. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, first, for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ and for salvation. We thank you for the opportunity we get to share that gift of salvation with others as well as to serve them in your name. We think of Colina; we think of Jim Drake’s faithfulness. We think of all that ministry means. In many ways we get more out of it by *going* than they get out of us *coming*. We just pray for this team right now. We pray for Kathy and Jim, Anita, Jerry, Erving, Patrick and Dana. We thank you, Lord, for their giving up their time. We thank you for their families giving them up to this service. And we understand that you've already prepared that which is going to happen, you know what's going to happen. We pray that you would bless them and help them to get closer to each other, but most importantly, closer to you and to serve you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Hovermale – Scripture Readings

Proverbs 9:1-6

- ¹ Wisdom has built her house;
she has set up its seven pillars.
² She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.
³ She has sent out her servants, and she calls
from the highest point of the city,
⁴ “Let all who are simple come to my house!”
To those who have no sense she says,
⁵ “Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.
⁶ Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of insight.”

Proverbs 9:13-18

- ¹³ Folly is an unruly woman;
she is simple and knows nothing.
¹⁴ She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
¹⁵ calling out to those who pass by,

who go straight on their way,
16 “Let all who are simple come to my house!”
To those who have no sense she says,
17 “Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”
18 But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

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

Rev. Ashley — Sermon: “Practice & Rituals... Hold to God’s Instructions”

Friends, let us pray. Lord God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that as your Word is read and proclaimed today that we may joyfully give thanks for all of your gifts of grace. Amen.

Friends, like many of you, perhaps, I am completely captivated with the Summer Olympics that are currently taking place in Tokyo, after being postponed for a year due to COVID-19. There are over 11,000 athletes from 206 countries who have gathered in Japan to compete, and 41 sports and 339 activities. It's just such an amazing opportunity for the world to gather together and celebrate their gifts.

Last Sunday I watched some of my favorite events on prime time, and those are swimming and gymnastics. I just adore watching those athletes perform. Some of my absolute favorites are Simone Biles and Katie Ledecky. How can you not help but be impressed with these two amazing women! If you would just indulge me for a second, I have some of their stats to share with you all. Remember, these are the stats prior to the Olympic Games; no spoilers, I promise!

Twenty-four years of age, Simone Biles has a total of 30 Olympic and world championship medals. She is the most decorated American gymnast, male or female, and is considered one of the greatest gymnasts of all time. Also, at twenty-four years, Katie Ledecky has a total of 20 Olympic and world championship medals, the most in history for a female swimmer. I cannot wait to see what these two women continue to do in their sports, moving forward, both on and off the mat or the pool, if you would.

We all know that it takes extensive training for these athletes to, literally, become the very best in the world. Not surprisingly, a huge part of their training regimen actually includes what they eat; it includes their diet. Now it may not be true that athletes eat tens of thousands of calories, which was what was thought at the time that Michael Phelps was swimming. However, they do pay special attention to what they consume, especially during very intense periods of training or, of course, competition. *Olympians know that although they might enjoy a pile of junk food in the moment, they will be better equipped to face the challenges ahead of them if they choose to feast on healthy items.*

In our passage today from Proverbs, we, too, are invited to attend a feast. In fact we are given invitations to two feasts, two very different types of feasts. Verses one through six describe our first option, which is hosted by Lady Wisdom. As I shared back when I taught on the preciousness of wisdom, wisdom, itself, is personified in Proverbs as a woman who acts on behalf of God to instruct God's people in God's ways and God's truth, love and grace.

Here, we see Lady Wisdom laboring to construct a house, one that has seven pillars. We know that seven is often seen in Judeo-Christian tradition as the 'perfect number'; think of the number of days in creation, for example. Having set this house having seven pillars suggests that Lady Wisdom is building such an opulent grand and perfect home for what is coming next. After completing her above-average home, Lady Wisdom moves on, completing her above-average meal. The meal itself consists of meat and mixed wine, two items that would have been reserved only for the elite. But Lady Wisdom does not intend to enjoy her fine food and home alone! Instead, she makes every effort to welcome everyone else to share in this blessing. Not only does she send her servants to go out and invite others to come, but she goes out herself to extend this welcome to all.

Specifically, Lady Wisdom's invitation is directed to all "who are simple and to those who have no sense". Now I'll be the first to admit that when I read this, it sounded a little bit like a veiled insult. However, I did a little bit of research, and this is what I found. One scholar offers this interpretation of "the simple and the senseless". The invitation extended by Lady Wisdom is to *anyone* who desires God's wisdom, to all those who strive to gain insight. Okay, I like that a little bit better. Lady Wisdom works diligently to present a physical place and physical substance to anyone who would like to join her and to learn from her.

What is offered by Lady Wisdom is in sharp contrast to that which is offered by Lady Folly. In verses 13 through 18, we read about her very minimal effort. No reference is made to Lady Folly building a home, nor preparing a feast. Lady Folly makes no effort to invite her guests in. Instead, she simply sits in the entryway to her house and calls out to just anyone who happens to pass by.

The only thing that these two ladies hold in common is their desire for others to join them. Even then, with that common thing, they still differ very much on their motivation. While Lady Wisdom seeks to teach her guests about the ways of God, Lady Folly encourages her guests to prioritize their own desires, regardless of their consequences or whether they even disregard God's law. However, it is the final distinction between these two feasts that's the most important for us to realize.

The difference that's really being highlighted by this whole description you see in the eight chapters prior to our scripture reading for today. The Proverbs author has spent a considerable amount of time describing the attributes of both Lady Wisdom and of Lady Folly, including their most defining qualities, the things that they like to do, the ways that they interact with the world and the consequences or the gains of following after each of them. But it is at the end of this multi-chapter section that the author shares the most important distinction between these two ladies. In verse 6 we read that those who accept Lady Wisdom's invitation will live and they will learn how to walk in the ways of insight. But for those who accept Lady Folly's invitation, verse 13 tells us, little do they know, that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead. Ultimately, the choice between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly and their respective banquets is a choice between life and death, a choice between life with God or death in sin.

Friends, we are welcome to each one of these banquets. We are given the choice of which one that we would like to attend. Although I'd like to think that the choice is obvious, even easy, I'll be the first to admit that sometimes I find myself tempted to show up to the wrong party. Maybe there is some truth in what the ladies say in verses 4 and 16. Maybe we are a little bit more *simple* and a little bit more *senseless* than we'd like to ever admit. But friends, there *is* good news because I think God knows this. I believe that God knows of our simple and our senseless ways, perhaps more than anybody else. I believe that God loves us

anyway. In fact, I believe that God loves us so very much, God chooses to reach out to us in ways that are simple, that we can understand and grasp and hold on to.

When I read this passage in Proverbs with its talk of the table, wine and food, I just can't help but think of the sacrament of communion. Communion is an example of my favorite theological concept called divine accommodation. Divine accommodation is the belief that God does everything in God's power to communicate with us, everything in God's power to reach out and to draw us to God. This includes reaching out to us in our sinfulness and in our struggle. To choose God and choose between God's wisdom and our own as physical creatures, God knows that we do best when we have physical reminders to hold on to, ones to point to, to grasp, to experience.

God provides us so well with the stories and lessons in scripture to teach us about God's love and presence. God then goes a step further and shows us what this love and presence actually look like. This ultimate example is, of course, found in Jesus Christ, the one who comes to earth, who teaches us about who God is and about what God is doing in the work of the Kingdom. However, Jesus knew that He would not be with us, physically, forever. After his resurrection He would ascend to the Father, so in order to accommodate our need for physical touch points, Jesus gave us the sacraments as tangible practices that would remind us of God's promises forever.

The sacrament of communion does just that! At the table we are asked to reflect on the teachings of Jesus and on the wisdom of God that was revealed through Him. At the table, as we eat the bread and drink the wine or grape juice or again whatever elements you have in your home, we are invited to celebrate that Jesus came to earth to proclaim the love of God and died so that we might be with God forever.

But friends, that is not all that communion has to offer. In the reformed tradition, communion isn't simply an act of *remembering*. It is an invitation to *experience* God in ways right now. We are invited to be lifted up by the Spirit into the presence of Christ and united with the church. Every time and in every place, in this moment, our baptismal identity is strengthened and reinforced, so that we are able to recommit ourselves to serve God and to hold fast to God's instructions and commands, just like the ones we've been reading throughout our time in Proverbs.

By partaking of the sacrament of communion, time and again, when we are tempted at the table of folly we can say, "No thank you," because we are already full. We are already full of the life-sustaining promises of God and the knowledge of who God is and what God is doing in this world. We are full of the presence of Christ who ushers us into the family of God and who invites us to experience a taste of the final banquet which He alone is preparing for us. And we are full of the strength that we can come to know, the truth of our baptismal identity and the confidence that we are created, redeemed and sustained through the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Only once we are full of these life-giving gifts that are offered at the banquet of wisdom, only then, will we be ready to face each new day and the temptations of sin that we will inevitably face!

Friends, as we come to our own communion table today, let us remember that in life we are offered invitations, again, to two very different banquets, but that God offers us physical reminders of which banquet truly is best. Let us joyfully embrace these rituals and the gifts that they offer us, each and every time we partake in them. Finally, let us be like those Olympians that we idolize and love to watch, the ones who choose good food over junk.

May we be better equipped to run the race that is set for us when we partake, when we receive the invitation of the banquet of our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Ashley — Call to Communion

Friends, as we gather around this table today, we are invited to remember the words of Jesus, the one who says, “Come, come, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and in me you will find rest for your souls.”

Let us take time now to come before our God in prayer. As we do so, I invite you to remember that this is God’s table, and at God’s table you and all are welcome. Let us pray.

Rev. Ashley — Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and The Lord’s Prayer

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon your gifts of bread and wine. May the bread we break and may the cup we bless be the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By your Spirit, unite us with the living Christ and with all who are baptized in His name that we may be one in ministry and in every place. Send us out to be the body of Christ in the world, to build up the body of Christ in your love and equip the church for the work of ministry. Make us one body in Christ, for each one's gifts are honored and used for the good of all. May we all submit to one another in humility and in the bond of the Holy Spirit. Send us out into the world to do justice, to show mercy and to walk humbly with you in trust and faith. Give us strength to serve you faithfully until that promised day of resurrection when, with the redeemed of all the ages, we will feast with you at your table in glory.

And now with the confidence of the children of God, let us pray together the words that Christ has taught us to say:

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.

Rev. Ashley — Words of Institution and Breaking of Bread

Indeed, friends, I'm excited to tell you about the night that our Lord Jesus was betrayed. On that night he took the bread and after giving thanks to his Father in heaven for it, he broke it, saying, “Take, eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” After supper, Jesus took the cup saying, “This cup is the new covenant poured out in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Every time you drink of it, do so in remembrance of me.” Now, every time we take this bread and take this cup we proclaim the saving work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, until He comes again.

Friends, I invite you now to come—come, because these are the gifts of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God! The table is set, and you are welcome to enjoy these gifts for yourself now.

Rev. Ashley — Closing Prayer

Let us pray. Gracious God, you have called us all together at this table from our different homes and spaces of worship, joined by all of your people in heaven and on earth. In your mercy we have been nourished by the living bread of Jesus Christ and we have been refreshed by the power of your Holy Spirit. May we who have shared in this holy meal go out as glad disciples of our Lord, following in His way, claiming His truth, and living His love for all the world to see. Amen.

**Fifth Season Ensemble Sings *“Lord, From Your Heart”*
Accompanied by Sharon Smith**

Rev. Ashley — Benediction and Blessing

Friends, as we depart from this space may we be filled with joy and thanksgiving. Having accepted the invitation of God to join God at the banquet of wisdom, may we continue to embrace the practices and rituals like communion that help us hold fast to God's promises and wisdom forever. 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.