

Back in 2007 Fox Network launched a brand-new nighttime game show called “Are You Smarter than a 5th grader?” Who here watched that show? The game presented a contestant with the challenge of answering 10 questions. The questions were taken from textbooks from grades 1-5. The contestant could get help from a “classmate”, one of 5 school age cast members. Let’s see how you do with some of these questions:

- The earth is located in what galaxy? The Milky Way
- How many months in the calendar year have exactly 30 days? 4
- How many letters are there in the English alphabet? 26
- What is the plural form of the word Moose?
- Finally, are you ever smart enough to stop studying God’s word?

Good answer!

This week we continue our journey through the words of our purpose statement. Let’s look at our purpose statement again.

POWERPOINT SLIDE

The goal is to begin to make our purpose statement a part of everything we say and everything do. Today we move on to the second section:

BACK TO SERMON SLIDE

To Learn together to follow the example of Jesus.

Just as we need to be intentional about how we welcome each other, we also need to be intentional about learning, about continuing education. To find out more about the importance of learning as part of our spiritual path, we’ll turn to a very logical, very wise source. Proverbs.

Did you ever wonder what a proverb is? Whew...A proverb is a riddle. It points to a deeper meaning. The answer to whatever riddle is offered is a moral instruction, exhortation, or a word of wisdom on how to live life. You might recognize the word proverb by its Greek translation, parable. I see you...you’re all itching to go back and look at one of Jesus’ proverbs.

I don't know about you, but for the longest time I avoided Proverbs. I didn't need to read something that was going to show just how dumb I was. But thank goodness for maturity, because now I love Proverbs. I actually try to read through it entirely a couple of times each year. As advised by one of our early church fathers, Origen, I encourage you to start with Proverbs and read all the way through Song of Solomon.

But if we look closely, we will see that in the first seven verses of this book we can learn a lot about why continuing education is so important. Why should we pursue continual learning? Let's look at Vs 2-6

For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight. For gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity. To teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young. Let the wise, too, hear and gain in learning and the discerning acquire skill. To understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.

For those of you that love riddle, you are in good company. Solomon loved riddles too! But did he ever figure out this one...Where would you take a sick boat? To the dock?

Now, even if we have all of these things, wisdom, instruction, words of insight, wise dealing, righteousness, justice, equity, shrewdness, knowledge, prudence, and understanding. Why would we care about any of this? Verse 7 brings it home. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and instruction. Without this fear what are we left with? We are left to be fools who despise this. Think about someone who despises wisdom and instruction...don't say their name out loud!

With Proverbs as our guardrail. With wisdom and instruction as our mark twain. How do we as United Methodists approach learning and wisdom? May I introduce to you the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are the most critical sources of learning and wisdom for United Methodists. Now John Wesley never actually used the term Quadrilateral, but he certainly emphasized the important role that each source should play in our personal and joint beliefs.

First, we have Scripture. It should be primary in how we rank any other source that informs our beliefs. As John Wesley said, it should be the “constant rule of our tempers, all our words, and all our actions.” He believed that the Bible alone had the capacity to shed light on our spiritual deficit and lead us into the light of salvation. As Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Scripture should be part of our everyday language. It should be in our words either directly or indirectly. As Psalm 119:103 says, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”

Scripture is our barometer for discerning the right choices on moral issues. How often has the knowledge of that still, small voice that Elijah heard in 1 Kings 19:12 spoken to me!

The summer after my sophomore year at ORU, I went on a summer mission trip to Mexico City. This was the year after the big earthquake of 1985. Sandwiched buildings and tent cities full of displaced citizens were everywhere. I had a chance to stay with this mission after summer and until Christmas. I was sure this was what God wanted. But the funding wasn't coming together. Neither was the agreement from my parents. Finally, one night I “had it out” with God. My prayer was to be able to stay. But I experienced this voice telling me to go back home. I immediately recognized it as the same still, small voice that Elijah heard. It was by going back and continuing my education at ORU that I would also meet the man who would be the father of my three children.

What John Wesley said in the preface to his Notes rings true, the Bible is a “solid and precious system of Divine Truth.” My Mexico City experience was certainly a formation to my future outlook on life.

John Wesley believed that scripture contained everything needed for salvation. We see this evidenced in Romans 1:16 where Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

While supporting a viewpoint in which Scripture was primary, John Wesley did not adopt a “sola” or only Scripture mindset. Not all protestants of his day accepted that outlook. Members of the reformed movement explicitly “rejected everything not condoned in Scripture.” As he was so apt to do, John Wesley walked the fine balance between sola scripture and abject rejection of it.

Part of maintaining this balance comes in looking at the other parts of the quadrilateral. While we believe that scripture is primary, we don’t believe it is ever alone. Reason, Tradition, and Experience are critical components of our entire doctrine. Reason and Scripture went hand in hand for Wesley, as they do for me.

What does reason bring to me personally? It helps in my interpretation of Scripture. It helps me do better at making my Christian witness clear. It helps me ask questions of faith. I want to work continuously to understand God’s will and actions. It also helps me test my witness against scripture. Reason helps us organize our thoughts and it helps me find relationships between what I believe and what the world around me believes.

The bible even encourages reasoning. Isaiah 1:18 starts out by saying, “Come now, let us reason together.” Reason does lean on human faculties. When reason is in doubt, we return to Scripture.

History and tradition are part of what makes anyone who we are. This is true of United Methodists as well. Tradition was important to John Wesley as he formed the Methodist movement, and it continues to be an important source of who we are today. As with any history and any tradition, there are parts of it we can be proud of, but there are also some ugly parts.

The American Deaconess movement is something we can be proud of. It was a place where women were able to rise up and become leaders. I believe it was a major catalyst in the Social

Gospel movement of the early 1900s. Through the vision and efforts of Lucy Rider Meyers, women were trained for missions and charitable activities. These students went on to expand foreign missions and worked with prisoners. They led Sunday School, worked in hospitals and orphanages and even braved midnight missions in railroad stations and high crime neighborhoods. These positive contributions, spearheaded by women, would eventually lead to their ability to become ordained.

Our ugly traditions lie in our involvement in slavery and in the discrimination of black people after the civil war. It would be wonderful if tradition just included all the good stuff. But just like real life, when we work to overcome the impacts of the ugly traditions, we work to become a better society.

While experience is part of our Quadrilateral, most feel that it is the weakest of sources. Even John Wesley said so. He said in his sermon, “The Witness of the Spirit, II” “Experience is not sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded on Scripture.” Still, the impact of experience cannot be discounted. I look at my own life. I was raised in a Christian home where church was important, and prayers were said daily. I never knew abuse in my home setting. I counter that with someone who hasn’t had any of that. Why would I expect their world view to be the same as mine?

It’s not any one but all of these sources that serve as “creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit.” As our Book of Discipline says, “What matters most is that all four guidelines be brought to bear in faithful, serious, theological consideration.”

Scripture, Reason, Tradition, Experience. This is the United Methodist way of continuing education. Of continuing to pursue Wisdom and Knowledge in the fear of the Lord. To continue our learning.

Let’s repeat our purpose statement one more time.

POWERPOINT SLIDE.

Learning. This is us, St. Johns Church Family. This is Us. Let us pray.