

SERMON TITLE: "The Tree of Life: God's Precious Wisdom"
SERMON TEXT: Proverbs 3:5-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 15, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I used to read the *Pickles* comic strip every morning. It was fun to see what elderly Earl and Opal were up to. But a couple months ago, *The Standard Examiner* stopped running *Pickles*. So now I've gotten started reading the comic strip *Flo and Friends*. It isn't as good as *Pickles*, but there were a couple story lines recently that seemed relevant to what we're doing here at church over the next several weeks. In the October 10th comic strip, Flo's friend was looking one direction into a jewelry store window. She said, "Goodness, Flo, just look at all that gold!" Flo was looking the other way. Instead of seeing gold jewelry, Flo was looking at some trees that had changed colors, with their beautiful gold leaves falling to the ground. "Yes!" Flo exclaimed. "Just look!"¹

My mom and I went for a drive last Sunday afternoon up around the Ogden Valley. Like Flo, we marveled at the brilliant and rich colors. I told Mom that an annual drive to see the orange and red colors was my way of getting a cheap thrill. It doesn't cost much, but it's like giving yourself an expensive gift. Or, rather, it's like God giving us a glorious gift of riches, far more than our money could ever buy.

Every fall, almost as surely as the autumn leaves changing colors, our congregation holds a stewardship campaign in which we make a financial appeal for funding our church's ministries in the coming year. We try to have some interesting themes to engage our imaginations and give us a new twist on how to talk and think about our relationship with money, our spiritual growth in generosity, and our financial support of the church. As Ray indicated in his talk this morning, our theme this year is "The Tree of Life." And our first sermon on this topic comes to us from Proverbs, chapter three, where God's wisdom is described as a tree of life. So, I invite you to consider these verses with me this morning. Let's see what the tree of life metaphor can tell us about God's precious wisdom.

1—TRUST IN THE LORD, NOT YOURSELF

When we look at these verses from Proverbs 3, what stands out immediately is verse five, which so many of us memorized years ago. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding.” The beginning of any wisdom about anything is the basic need to trust in God. And when we’re talking about money, we need to trust God even more.

While Mom and I were enjoying the gorgeous beauty of the fall colors last Sunday, I was reminded of the verses in Matthew 6, in which Jesus cautioned against too much worry about what we’ll eat, drink, or wear. Using rhetorical questions, Jesus asked, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (vv. 27-29). As Jesus was preaching that Sermon on the Mount, I can imagine him waving his hand to direct his hearers’ attention to a vast field of vibrant wildflowers. Like the gloriously-colored trees on the Wasatch Mountains, those flowers were not made by human hands or human understanding, but by the creative genius of God. I’m not saying that we humans can’t do some incredibly wonderful things. But why wouldn’t we want to trust a God who can dress the hills more richly than a king?

So often, when it comes to money, we’re afraid to let go and let God. Money, or the lack of it, is one of the biggest sources of human stress. But the Lord has proven over and over again that God is the one who has created and ordered this world in all its vast array of beautiful glory. When we stop relying on just ourselves and acknowledge the divine one who is really in charge, then we will be relieved of a lot of anxiety and troubles. As we relax in God’s care, our minds and our bodies will receive refreshing and healing power. The tree of life teaches us that God’s precious wisdom begins with trusting in the Lord and not our own understanding.

2—HONOR THE LORD WITH FIRST FRUITS

As we continue reading Proverbs 3, we see in verse nine the instruction to honor the Lord with our first fruits. This wisdom from the tree of life isn’t just an abstract principle. It isn’t just spiritual thoughts

and good intentions. Verse nine says that we should “honor the Lord with our substance.” This is a material act of giving back to God from the very real, physical products of income. The book of Proverbs was written in an agricultural time; that’s why barns full of produce and vats full of wine were discussed. Fruits, nuts, olives, and grapes grown on trees and vines were a very real part of the biblical world. Today, maybe we produce internet technology or elementary student learning. Maybe we produce health outcomes for our patients or military readiness for our U.S. Airforce. Or maybe we produce earnings on investment accounts and retirement funds.

Whatever fruits we produce, there’s a wisdom in honoring the Lord with them. And there’s a wisdom in giving to God first. The wise person doesn’t wait to see if there might possibly be some small pittance left at the end of the month that could be donated. No, the wise person offers to God first and then lives off the rest. The reason this is possible is found in verses 11 and 12. There we see talk about discipline and reproof. Because the Lord loves us, the Lord corrects us and directs us. The Lord teaches us how to live on less, so that we end up having more.

It’s like the principle of compounded interest. We all know that it’s really difficult for a young adult to start saving for their retirement. But, if a person begins squirreling away retirement funds when they’re young, then those savings multiply and compound over the years into a much bigger nest egg than if the person sets aside the same amount of dollars later in life. Did you notice that those images of squirrels and nests both relate to trees? The wisdom of the tree of life informs us that, when we honor God with our first fruits, then our blessings will grow bigger and bigger over the years.

Of course, if we’re hungry and have the expenses of a mortgage, rent, car payments, insurance, utilities, clothes to buy for growing kids, student loans, etc., it isn’t easy to put God first. It takes a lot of discipline from God and within ourselves to make our giving to God a priority. But that discipline pays off as we find ourselves filled with plenty.

Some preachers and televangelists preach what’s called a “prosperity gospel.” They tell their listeners that, if they send in money to their ministries, the donors will prosper and become rich.

Oftentimes those prosperity gospel preachers wear very expensive clothes and jewelry and drive very expensive cars. They live in giant mansions and sometimes have private jets. They do that to persuade their donors that God will make them prosper too. I hope you know that I'm **not** preaching like that. I'm **not** saying that, if you put X dollars in our FUMC offering plates, then you are going to get X + Y dollars of benefit in return. I don't believe it works like that at all. But I do know that giving first to God assists us in developing some healthy financial habits and disciplines that will benefit us throughout our lives.

To return to Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Through that discipline of putting God first, we will be filled with plenty.

3—LIVE LONG AND WELL IN HAPPINESS

The wisdom we gain through the tree of life goes a long way toward ensuring our well-being. As we read in Proverbs 3:14, the income of wisdom "is better than silver, and her revenue is better than gold." Verse 15 tells us that wisdom "is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with" God's insight and understanding. Not only does God's wisdom help us develop good financial habits, but wisdom also assists in living a healthy, long, and happy life.

I read a news article just this week about new research on longevity and education levels in the United States. Demographics now show that those who have a college degree live several years longer than people with only a high school diploma. Holding a degree and being wise aren't necessarily the same thing, but there are substantial advantages to being an educated person. Similarly, those who trust in the wisdom of God and accept God's discipline are generally going to be happier, healthier, and able to enjoy more peace. As we read in Proverbs 3:18, God's wisdom is like a tree of life with deep roots that are able to tap into ground water and nutrients. God's wisdom is like a tree of life with wide branches and lots of leaves to synthesize and purify even what's in the air around us.

In the autumn, when the leaves fall off the trees, it would be easy for us to think that the trees are unhealthy and dying. But actually, they're doing a wise and self-protective act. They're drawing their sap back into the trunk and roots, so that the tree won't be damaged by the freezing temperatures of winter. And they're shedding their leaves so the snow can't pile up on the trees and break the branches. Unlike some of us who tend to hoard and cling to our possessions—in wisdom, the trees lighten their load so that they can be nimble and strong to survive the season ahead. In God's precious wisdom, the trees anticipate and prepare for a happy future of next year's spring and summer. I know that we don't normally think of trees as being wise. But many types of trees live much longer than we humans do. So maybe we can appreciate this wisdom that comes from the tree of life.

CONCLUSION

Maybe you noticed the increasing darkness that occurred yesterday morning while the solar eclipse was happening. Due to the cloud cover and us being too far north, we couldn't see the event in its fullness. If the conditions had been right, we might have been able to look up into the sky with some special eclipse glasses. Or, like Ron Mowbray and I discussed last week, we could have poked a hole in a box and looked at the image of the eclipse projected through the hole.

On Thursday, in *The Standard Examiner*, there was an article that told of another way some people might observe the eclipse. Weber State University astronomy professor John Armstrong was quoted as saying, "If you can find a tree with dappled shade underneath it, those crisscrossing leaves form little 'pinhole cameras' and you'll actually see images of the annular eclipse on the ground.'" ² Trees are pretty amazing resources to us. May we recognize God's precious wisdom in the tree of life.

¹Jenny Campbell, distrib by Creators Syndicate.

²Rob Nielsen, "Utah to experience 'ring of fire' annular eclipse this weekend; Ogden to see partial effect," 10/12/23, p. A8.