

Prudence

Proverbs 1:1-2:15

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First Central Congregational UCC

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The last six weeks I've been preaching a series on the virtues entitled "The Good Life." We have one more week after this one. Next week I'll be preaching on charity. This week it's prudence. Now, when I hear that word, probably the first thing that jumps to my mind are the lyrics of the Beatles song:

Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?
Dear Prudence, greet the brand new day
The sun is up, the sky is blue
It's beautiful and so are you
Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?

The virtue of prudence is connected with wisdom, and often the two words are used interchangeably. It is, in fact, practical wisdom—the ability to discern what is right and wrong and to use that judgment in planning properly. For some philosophers prudence is the virtue that makes all the others possible. You can only learn to live courageously, temperately, lovingly if you have developed the ability to discern and make good judgments.

Throughout this series I've benefited from reading the website of the Virtue First Foundation. There they dedicate a page to each of the many virtues, far more than the seven we've explored. Each page shares stories and quotes, essays and practical advice. The page for prudence was quite helpful.

The Virtue First Foundation states that prudence "requires three mental actions: taking counsel carefully with our self and others, judging correctly from the evidence at hand, and directing the rest of our activity based on the norms we have established."

According to them, there are eight integral parts to prudence. First is the ability to judge good and bad by the use of our intellect. Second is the ability to learn from our experience. Next is open-mindedness. They write in way of explanation, "it requires a recognition of one's own limitations and ready acceptance of those limits."

The fourth integral feature is shrewdness, described as "sizing up a situation on one's own quickly." This is coupled with the fifth feature, the ability to research a situation. One is the ability to think quickly. The other is the ability to think slowly and carefully. The truly wise and prudential person has both abilities.

The final three have to do with understanding the context and setting goals for the future. First, is foresight, the ability to set goals and plan ahead to achieve them. Next is circumspection, which means being able to take all relevant circumstances into account when planning and deciding. Finally, there is caution. The prudential person does not move hastily,

but prepares for risks.

So, to summarize, prudence involves good judgment, learning from experience, open-mindedness, shrewdness, investigation, foresight, circumspection, and caution. Of course, for the truly wise person these come naturally. They don't sit and tick off a list to make sure they've done all these things. But, if you are someone who thinks this is a virtue you need to practice and cultivate, maybe it's not a bad idea to keep that list available when trying to make a decision.

As Christians, we believe that this ability is cultivated within us by the Holy Spirit. Our understanding of wisdom is rooted in the ancient Hebrew idea of Divine Wisdom, Sophia, personified as a woman crying out in the streets, calling the people to live righteous and just lives. In Jewish thought she is a manifestation of God that many Christians have identified with the Christ, the second person of the Trinity. It was Divine Wisdom which the historical Jesus of Nazareth made manifest in his life and teachings.

The wisdom we gain from God directs us away from evil and destruction and onto the path of salvation and liberation. In Proverbs we read that if we cry out for insight, God's wisdom will be given to us, we will understand justice and equity, knowledge will be pleasant, prudence will watch over us, and understanding will guard us.

So, at this point you might be thinking that this all sound rather abstract and heady. Ray Vickrey, the last pastor I served as an associate, was fond of criticizing theology and philosophy for speaking in a language he called "Upper Garble."

The truth is that the basics of the virtue of prudence are easy to grasp. Our children learn these skills, after all.

This week I was drawn back to Robert Fulghum's very popular 1986 essay (and yes, it was that long ago) entitled "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Let me read bit of that wonderful essay to you. [Read from pages 6-8 of the book of essays of the same title].

Reading that essay again reminded me of one of the wisest people I've ever known—my kindergarten Sunday school teacher Ruth Robinson. I've mentioned her to you before. Ruth was the stereotypical little old lady—short, with bright white hair, and big glasses. She lived in a little white house, which had a blackberry bramble in the backyard. She liked to watch *Lawrence Welk* and made wonderful Swedish Meatballs. She was the single most important influence on my own faith development outside of my parents.

One time she was babysitting me and my sister Kelli at her house. When the *Lawrence Welk Show* came on, I got up and turned the channel. Ruth admonished me. She instructed me to turn the channel back, explaining that she was watching it, that she liked the show, that this was her home, that I was her guest, and that I didn't get to watch whatever I wanted all the time. Now, watching *Lawrence Welk* is like dying a slow painful death via Chinese water torture. I thought that when I was five and I still think that. But this lesson was about thinking not only of yourself, but of others and respecting their desires and wishes even when they were quite contrary to your own. From Ruth I learned not to be selfish, but to be tolerant of diversity.

During the annual Easter Egg hunt at church, all the kids were running around collecting

eggs. Ruth noticed that in my excitement, I was running and swinging my basket so much that all my eggs were falling out and that other kids were coming along behind me getting my eggs that I was dropping. When I finally noticed, I had hardly any eggs compared to the other kids. But Ruth had grabbed a few and set them aside just for me. From Ruth I learned about a fairness that isn't blind but sees with eyes of compassion.

Once, when she was over for Sunday lunch at our house, I asked for something to be passed to me by one of my parents, who went to do it, when Ruth said gently, "Scotty, you didn't say please." Ruth cared that I learn manners more than my own parents did. She taught me to say please and thank you and you're welcome. But these were so much more than just polite language. From Ruth I learned hospitality and gratitude.

Ultimately, Ruth taught me that I was a loved child of God. When I was five years old she told me that I would receive "crowns of glory" one day for any ministry done during my life for God's kingdom. It was a beautiful image to be guided by as a child.

So, let's add a little more prudence to our lives, that our lives might be better. In the end, those Beatles lyrics aren't bad at all.

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