

Learning Wisdom

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, 10 October 2018

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16.

Folks my age may remember Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. It was a collection of essays about life lessons found in ordinary things, like playing hide and seek, jumping in puddles, and opening a box of crayons.

The book started as an annual spiritual practice. Every spring, Fulghum explained, he used to write his own creed, a personal statement of what he believed at that point in his life. Over the years, the creed got longer and longer until he finally realized he did not need to keep writing because already knew what he believed. He had known it for a long time.

"All I really need to know," he wrote, "about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School."

He went on, "Think what a better world it would be if we all – the whole world – had cookies and milk around three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess."

In the spirit of Robert Fulghum, here are some things I've noticed children learning at St. Thomas Day School. Take turns. Make good choices. Keep your hands to yourself. Use your words. Be kind. Put a bubble in your mouth and listen.

I've spent fourteen years now working around Episcopal schools like St. Thomas Day School. You might be surprised to know that schools are one of the more common ministries of the Episcopal Church. There are around 7000 Episcopal churches in 16 countries and almost 1200 Episcopal schools and early childhood centers. About a sixth as many schools as churches. Our schools serve around 160,000 students. The largest number is in Haiti, where there are around 250 Episcopal schools. On average, only about 25% of students at Episcopal schools are Episcopalian, but Haiti skews the average, so for most the percentage is much lower. These schools intentionally welcome students and families from many faith traditions – different kinds of Christians, people who practice other religions, and people of no faith. There is room for everyone.

The National Association of Episcopal Schools, which St. Thomas Day School has joined, explains, "Episcopal schools ensure that their missions are built on the sure foundation of Christian love that guides and challenges all who attend our schools to build lives of genuine meaning, purpose, and service in the world they will inherit." Beginning even in preschools like St. Thomas.

The Bible has a word for this way of life – a life centered on meaning, purpose, and service. It is that same word Robert Fulghum found in the sandpile at Sunday School. Wisdom.

Wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge. Schools do teach knowledge. Children at St. Thomas learn letters and numbers and colors. We hope their years here prepare them to do well in the classroom, love learning and be intellectually curious. But even more, we hope they are being formed in wisdom.

If you've been at St. Thomas for the past several weeks, you heard several scripture lessons from Proverbs. Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings about how to lead a life of meaning, purpose, and service. In old times people would collect these sayings and pass them along, sort of like *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

But today we turn our attention to another book of the Bible and another kind of wisdom. We will hear from the book of Job for the next several weeks. Job is also a book of wisdom.

Most biblical scholars today think of Job as more of a fable than history. Job is not a biography of an individual who encountered great tragedy. Job is a wider story about all of us, in all of the losses and difficulties and challenges of our lives. The opening set up about an agreement between God and Satan is not the main point, so please don't get the idea that God is capricious and lets Satan have his way with us on a whim. The opening is just an old way of setting up a story about what it looks like to remain faithful when things go really bad.

And we know they will. Sometimes things go bad in life. We wish and hope that life for children will always be like today's gospel lesson. We want all children to be gathered into the arms of Jesus and held in safety throughout their lives. But even though that is our fervent hope, we all know that may not happen, at least not every day. They will encounter loss and grief. They will fail. God forbid, we may fail them. Someone or something may hurt them. Life will not be easy. And if it is too easy, it is highly possible that they will not grow, and will not discover what they are capable of, and that would be a tragedy in itself.

So Job is about the wisdom that comes from enduring hard things. Job is about the wisdom that comes from wrestling with hard questions and not settling for easy answers. Job is about learning to hang on to God and find your voice even when others tell you to curse God and die. In the end, Job learns that God is God and he is not and God is even more wonderful than he had ever imagined. With humility, Job accepts his place in the universe. That's wisdom.

In the set up, God trusts that Job has the capacity to overcome the challenges he will face. Please hear that. Job's sufferings are not a punishment. They are not even a test. They just are. The book of Job assumes that evil is present in the world along with the good. That's the way life is. But throughout the conversation with Satan, God is confident that Job has the capacity to endure faithfully whatever comes his way.

This is one of the most important lessons we can help children learn – not just how to succeed, but how to fail, how to persevere in the face of trials, how to fall off the bike and get back on again. The world desperately needs children who know they can do hard things. Ending poverty, healing racism, stopping terrorism, promoting gender equity, and restoring the planet are not

going to be easy. They will have to know how to persevere. In love, God did not shield Job from difficulty. God trusted Job to learn and endure. Children need no less from us.

In a very convoluted way, the writer of Hebrews was trying to say a similar thing. This world is not yet under the rule of heaven. We do not yet see everything in subjection to the angels. God's kingdom is not yet come and God's will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven. Things get pretty messed up in this life.

But like Jesus we can endure. In love, Jesus entered this very messed up world, not unexpectedly like Job but willingly. He entered this world and suffered in it and remained faithful. Hebrews says he was made perfect, meaning whole and complete, in his sufferings. Consider that – suffering made even Jesus complete. And we are like him. Hebrews says, “The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.” That makes us brothers and sisters of Jesus. We, too, can endure whatever this broken world throws at us and come out stronger on the other side. We can live lives of meaning, purpose, and service no matter what.

For sixty years, St. Thomas Church has helped people gain wisdom and live lives marked by meaning, purpose, and service. We do this through worship and learning and welcome and service. And fifty-nine years ago, when this church was barely a year old, St. Thomas started the day school as a way to help more people live with meaning, purpose, and service. Try to imagine how many people have been touched by this school. Think of all the students and their parents and grandparents. Think of all the teachers. Everywhere I go in this city, I meet people with a connection to St. Thomas Day School. Thousands of people in this community have been reminded to live lives of wisdom because of what they learned here.

I don't know that Father Dewey Gable or Georgia Wilkins or John Amos or the other founders of St. Thomas thought the school would be around this long when they started it. I doubt they were thinking that far ahead. I suspect they were simply trying to be obedient to Jesus who said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

We can learn a lot from little children, like how to be the people God calls us to be. Thanks be to God.

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All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Robert Fulghum. Random House, 1986.

Information about the National Association of Episcopal Schools is at naes.org.

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