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Scripture: Proverbs 1:1-7

I think we can all picture the epitome of book-smart persons. They know their facts. They are extremely intelligent in a specific field of study. They read and read and can work on equations and master complex maps and diagrams. These are the Albert Einsteins of the world. He discovered the theory of relativity and mastered nuclear fission, and yet the legends that we've all heard are that Einstein didn't always tie his shoes or keep his hygiene. These book-smart people of the world are epitomized on TV by the likes of Steve Urkel in the 90's and today by Sheldon Cooper from Big Bang Theory. Many of you know Sheldon is a theoretical physicist by day and a socially confused nerd by night. Can you picture your book-smart friends? Maybe this is you?

Now, of course, culturally the book-smart people are countered by street-smart people. You probably know these savvy social people, too. Practical knowledge comes easy to these folks, navigating around town, changing a tire, making small talk, making quick daily decisions, gauging other people and what they're looking for. Sheldon Cooper is juxtaposed by the street savvy Penny on Big Bang, but you might also know exemplars of street smarts in your own life. These are the masters of common sense.

Book Smart and Street Smart—which is better? Well, depending on which direction you might lean, you might argue for a different perspective. Book-smart people would challenge our societal ability to invent and create and discover new things without them. But, of course, street-smart folks would challenge our ability as a people to connect with one another and make deals and agreements, or maybe just to shower daily without them.

This age-old debate comes into play in the ancient book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a book of wisdom and I'll tell you in a moment whether it is a book of street-smart or book-smart wisdom. Commentator John Miller (not our John Miller) says the book of Proverbs is like a coffee-table book that you can pick up and turn to any page to find some fascinating tidbit of wisdom falling out.¹ Each proverb has a stroke of wisdom to share, but there are different kinds of proverbs in this book. When we think of a proverb in our time, we often think of short quippy saying that might have a nugget of truth—"Don't put all your eggs in one basket" or "The early bird gets the worm" or "Birds of a feather flock together." Some of the proverbs in the Bible might have a similar effect as Proverbs 14:15—"The simple believe everything but the clever consider their steps." or Proverbs 21:23—"To watch over mouth and tongue is to keep out of trouble." There are lots of these clever sayings in Proverbs, but there are also more elongated arguments for wisdom like the poetry about Lady Wisdom speaking on the streets in Proverbs 1 or the poetry about a good and capable wife in the final chapter.

John Miller says that our word proverb comes from the ancient Hebrew *Mashal* which meant "a poem-like construction long or short that states a truth or teaches a lesson in a picturesque, compelling manner."² So essentially, Proverbs is a book of a variety of teaching poems, teaching lessons on wisdom.

Proverbs teaches wisdom. And as we read Proverbs, we discover that wisdom is neither knowledge from book smarts nor the common sense of street smarts. Wisdom facilitates a conversation between the two of them. Wisdom brings together knowledge and sense. Wisdom is when we take what we know—actual knowledge, and demonstrate an ability to use it well—

¹ Miller, John. *Proverbs: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Herald Press, 2004. p 15.

² Ibid.

practical knowledge. Wisdom is the good application of knowledge. Wisdom is not either book smarts or street smarts, but it is the merger of the two. Thus, wisdom is the hardest to achieve.

Book smarts may have shown Einstein how to construct an atom bomb. Wisdom told him never to use it. Street smarts might help you negotiate a deal with a business partner, but wisdom informs you if such a deal is worth making.

The book of Proverbs is meant to guide its readers into a fuller understanding of wisdom. Our text for this morning comes straight out of the opening lines. They tell us that the book was written, "for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young." Many sections this book of wisdom are meant to instruct a young person moving into adulthood. It helps to move a simple, young, and categorical mind into complexity.

I believe that this should still be part of the mission of the church not only for our young people but also for all people. Our educational system and many of our teachers right here in this church do and have done an excellent job of teaching our kids knowledge. They know the stories from significant historical moments such as world wars, massive migrations, and local conflicts/ They know skills in mathematics and scientific principles and processes. They can write and read. They've even developed, hopefully, some skills in relating to different kinds of people. But there is plenty of room left for the church and our Christian homes to develop wisdom by taking this knowledge and these skills and giving it a purpose, a moral compass for what is right and just, and a spirit of discernment.

For what is the point in knowing if we do not understand how God might use our knowledge? Knowledge becomes something for the simple minded. Wisdom belongs to those who yearn to go deeper.

It is said that King Solomon wrote many of these proverbs, and that is quite possible. The collection of Proverbs was edited and added to at some point in time after Solomon. Some whole sections are attributed to other authors. But King Solomon, as you recall, asked God for wisdom and it was granted to him. As the story goes, Solomon's wisdom faded as he became distracted by accumulating wealth and foreign wives. John Miller, however, also notes a significant moment of Solomon being unwise as recorded in the book of Kings, when Solomon was ascending to the throne following his father David. Some of the priests, Levites headed by Abiathar, opposed Solomon's kingship, so Solomon banished those priests who were charged with keeping the Law of Moses and an unequivocal devotion to the Lord. Instead of Abiathar's Levites, Zadok's priests held an influence which may have resulted in the straying of King Solomon to worship other gods. Zadok's priests were not always so devout to the one true God.³

Wisdom, therefore, involves understanding a multiplicity of perspectives. It is not threatened by difference. It is not for the simple-minded but moves the mind to complexity. It can hold in tension multiple views and is prepared to discern what is the best.

A story is told of Mahatma Gandhi, "One day one of Mahatma Gandhi's disillusioned followers came up to him and said, 'You have no integrity. Last week I heard you say one thing, and today you are saying something different. How do you justify such vacillation?' Gandhi quietly replied, 'It is simple, really, my son. I have learned something since last week.'"⁴ The gift of holding tension is becoming more and more absent from our discourse.

³ Ibid. 19.

⁴https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=937

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But in the end, the one who is truly wise brings all of these aspects of wisdom together and will be governed by the simple statement at the end of today's text. Proverbs 1:7 says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

What should all knowledge and wisdom be rooted in? "The fear of the Lord." It's an Old Testament way of saying an unflappable, committed, deep respect for the lordship of Christ.

So, for you to be wise, what do you bring together? Some common sense street smarts, a curiosity to accumulate knowledge, the ability to hold competing views, and a whole lot of respect for the divinity of God. Remove any ingredient, and you may be simple or foolish. Combine them all and you'll be wise beyond any of our years. Unachievable? Probably. But this is the wisdom for which we ought to strive.