

**Lifelong Learning: Back to School Sunday**  
**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**  
**NPMC – Sept. 10, 2023**

*Hymns: VT 196 – Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom; 549 – Be Thou My Vision; 583 – O Christ, Impart Your Teaching True*

**Proverbs 4:5-9**

Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away  
from the words of my mouth.

<sup>6</sup> Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;  
love her, and she will guard you.

<sup>7</sup> The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,  
and whatever else you get, get insight.

<sup>8</sup> Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;  
she will honor you if you embrace her.

<sup>9</sup> She will place on your head a fair garland;  
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

**Luke 2:41-52, NRSV - The Boy Jesus in the Temple**

<sup>41</sup> Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup> And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup> When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. <sup>44</sup> Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. <sup>45</sup> When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you.” <sup>49</sup> He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” <sup>50</sup> But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup> Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

<sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

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I’m part of an online group on social media called Anabaptism: The Next Generation. It’s a group of Anabaptist-Mennonites across Canada who are in the midst of parenting young children and wanting to share struggles or resources or ideas. The official description of the group states,

This is a community for parents and others who are raising children in the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith.

We aspire to be a positive space to discuss, support and resource one another as we explore how to bring up our kids in the Anabaptist peace tradition; navigate the challenges of being counter-cultural families; and share in the everyday awkward, amusing, messy, and irreverent moments of life with kids.

Members of this group have roots in, or affiliation with, Mennonite Church Canada/USA. Our faith and spirituality includes a lot of peace, reconciliation, love, inclusion, and social justice. **We seek to pass along a faith to our children that inspires more love in the world and reduces religious-based harms.**

As I've spent time participating in this group, it's become evident to me that my generation of parents is very intentional about the way that faith is being passed down to the next generations. Maybe this is because it's such a deliberate choice to be part of a faith community in our generation, when something like 90% of people in Canada do not attend religious services regularly. Maybe it's also out of an awareness that just because a community is faith-based doesn't mean it is automatically healthy and life-giving (as some have experienced the opposite in church). So this choice comes from a desire to "pass along a faith to our children that inspires more love in the world and reduces religious-based harms" – in other words, to pass along the best of our faith tradition. And I've had some similar conversations in person here at NPMC as well!

Of course, this task isn't just limited to parents, however. Church communities have a responsibility as a whole to pass along the best of the faith to the younger generations. That's part of our purpose! As Anabaptist-Mennonites, we like to emphasize discipleship as the key to our faith, and one of the distinctives of our tradition. But what's interesting is that we often assume that discipleship has its roots in the word "discipline" – as in the "costly" discipleship that is the opposite of "cheap grace" (Bonhoeffer). But Jesus' disciples were not all about discipline (have you read the

Gospels? They bumble around and get things wrong quite a bit, especially in the Gospel of Mark!). Rather, the word “disciple” comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which simply means ‘learner.’ This is why it makes so much sense that they call Jesus “Teacher” – because they are his students, or learners, his disciples. So as disciples of Jesus, we are called to be learners.

This vision of seeking wisdom as central to faith is also reflected in our Scripture text from Proverbs 4. This book of the Bible begins with heeding one’s parents’ instructions. Prov. 1:8-9 states,

Listen, my [child], to your father’s instruction  
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.  
<sup>9</sup> They are a garland to grace your head  
and a chain to adorn your neck.

So we learn at the outset that wisdom here is understood as the wisdom of those who came before; this is a heeding of the tradition of one’s forbears. And throughout the book of Proverbs, it becomes more and more evident that this Wisdom is nothing less than God’s Wisdom – the voice of the Divine depicted as a wise woman sage.

Our passage spells out just how valuable and rewarding it is to keep wisdom central in one’s life:

Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away  
from the words of my mouth.  
<sup>6</sup> Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;  
love her, and she will guard you.  
<sup>7</sup> The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,  
and whatever else you get, get insight.  
<sup>8</sup> Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;  
she will honor you if you embrace her.  
<sup>9</sup> She will place on your head a fair garland;  
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.” (Proverbs 4:5-9)

So what does this look like in our time and place? I would say that we take this very seriously as a faith community! We run Sunday school programs and Kids' Club and Choir, we include children's time and songs in each Sunday worship service. One of our pastors, Luke Bushman, is primarily focused on ministry with this age group of our church family! Passing on the best of the tradition we've inherited, its ancient wisdom, is truly a priority for us. And this morning we want to bless these church programs as they begin a new year, that they would cultivate love and reduce harm in the children of our community.

Our second Scripture passage from Luke 2 perhaps gives us a bit more food for thought, however. It's one of the few stories in our Bible that's from Jesus' childhood, and it's not exactly a picture-perfect moment! It's actually more of a moment of parenting failure, immortalized for millennia on the pages of Scripture. How awkward that this is what was chosen to be remembered! But there is of course more to the story than this. Yes, Joseph and Mary lose track of their 12-year-old in the big city of Jerusalem for 72 hours, but let's remember why they were there in the first place: to bring him to the celebration of the Passover festival, to teach him more about his Jewish religious heritage. When it's time to return home, they assume he is with the group of relatives and neighbours with whom they're travelling. But come evening of their first day of travelling, the boy Jesus is nowhere to be found! So the search begins, and after three anxious days of searching (commentator Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes that the

Greek word here means “anguish” or “agony,” the deepest pain imaginable),<sup>1</sup> they finally find Jesus.

And where is he? He’s in the Temple, discussing theology with the teachers and religious leaders. He’s having an impromptu theology conference! Luke states, “they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (v. 46-47). And his parents are also “astonished” when they see him, and Mary scolds him. But when he answers, speaking about needing to be “in his Father’s house,” they do not understand what he’s talking about (v. 49-50). And then they all go home and Mary treasures what has happened in her heart.

Now what do we notice about this story? First of all, we see that the child Jesus is not just a passive recipient of wisdom or religious traditions in this story. Johnson says he “has studied the Torah and takes delight in debating it” with the experts, and “discovering his vocation” in the process.<sup>2</sup> Is this simply because Jesus is the son of God, and so wise beyond his years? Maybe. But what if it’s also a statement on the wisdom that children bring and what they have to teach the adults? Theologian David Csinos goes so far as to call children “little theologians,” stating, “Children are not simply passive consumers of theology; they actively generate theological meaning for themselves.”<sup>3</sup> This story therefore shakes up our notions of the church as some sort of a hierarchy, where elders always know best, to a community of shared wisdom, where even the youngest are valued for their contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 283-4.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 283-4.

<sup>3</sup> David Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2020), “Introduction.”

And what does this look like in practice? Well, Mary's open response to Jesus' perplexing words gives us a glimpse of this. Even though she does not understand what he is talking about and why he's not more remorseful about getting himself lost for three days – perhaps even because she doesn't understand – Mary “ponders these things in her heart.” This phrase also appears after the angels and shepherds have left the stable in Luke's version of the nativity. This Mary who ponders, who is “intensely ruminating over the word of God” shows us how to respond to new or startling information, even when it comes from the mouth of a child. Johnson writes, “No mindlessness here. [Mary] is trying to interpret her life. She is seeking to understand the difficult matters concerning the lives of those she loves. She is hoping to discern how the divine Spirit is moving in their midst.... Hers is a life in the process of becoming – no final answers yet available.”<sup>4</sup> Here is an example of discipleship as an openness to the unknown that seeks wisdom, even wisdom from the mouths of the young.

Our community also lives out a commitment to Bible study and discussion as lifelong spiritual practices, evident in our Women's Bible Study, Men's Study, Adult education, and yes, even worship, where together we ponder the mysteries of our faith in our hearts. In our Adult Ed. series on Gender and Sexual Diversity last Spring, there was a really valuable mutual discussion between different age groups of our congregation, for whom this particular issue looks very different. I was so encouraged by the wisdom that younger adults shared and offered at these sessions, and the openness with which older generations received it and pondered it. The phrase “life-long learning” came up during more than one of the sessions, bringing us back to that definition of disciples as simply learners. As we begin a new church program year, may

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 278.

we continue to foster and bless this kind of lifelong learning in and among all generations of our faith community.

I would like to close with a Back-to-School Blessing from Sarah Bessey:

Beloved one, as you begin anew, may the light of curiosity and truth of love guide you on this journey back to school. May you find the courage and humility to be both student and teacher, knowing that we all hold wisdom to share.

**May your hearts remain open to the stories woven into the pages of textbooks and the lives of your fellow travellers.** Let the diversity of thought and experience expand your horizons and deepen your love for the world.

In the stress of deadlines and assignments, remember that your worth is not measured by grades alone. Embrace the process, the questions that lead to even more questions. **May you experience moments of challenge and grace, laughter and learning as gifts.**

As you gather with friends old and new, may you build connections that bring goodness to you and the community around you. Be gentle with yourselves, for learning is not just about acquiring facts but about allowing transformation and growth, too.

**So, go forth with the grace of a learner's heart.** May you approach each day with a spirit of wonder, ready to engage, explore, and evolve.

**And as you venture into this new season of learning, may you always remember: you are enough and you are so very, very loved.** Amen